

UNDERGRADUATE GEOGRAPHY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THEIR ASSESSMENTS

BY

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in Education (Geography Education)

at the

University of KwaZulu-Natal

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December 2015

DECLARATION

I, Thabile Aretha Zondi (206513797) declare that:

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Thabile Aretha Zondi

As the candidate's supervisor I hereby approve the submission of the thesis for examination.

Dr. S. Manik

December 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank God the almighty for walking this journey right beside me, there were times where I felt I could not go on but he's been with me always to ensure that I carried on.

I would sincerely like to thank my supervisor, Dr S Manik for being more than an outstanding mentor to me. I am thankful for all your words of advice and being patient with me through the path of doing my research. Without your love and support I would not have completed this study. Thank you for all your persistence and dedication.

To my mum Thandiwe Xaba, I would like to thank you for all the love and support that you gave me over the years. I remember when I started this journey you had to look after my baby son while I worked long hours. Thank you for being my rock and believing in my capabilities.

To my husband, Sandile Shibe, thank you for all the love, support and patience you gave me all these years and for allowing me to work in the quiet of your home. Thank you for granting me space when I needed it. I took a lot of time that we could have spent as a family because of this study, thanks for being there for the children.

To the research participants from this study (Geography 3rd and 4th year student teachers) thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to complete questionnaires and also for agreeing to be interviewed. Without you, there would be no study.

To all my friends, colleagues and ex-students (especially Kgothalo Ramabele) thank you for all the words of encouragement and for all the services rendered. May God bless you abundantly for your selflessness.

To my children: Sisanda and Siphesihle, thank you for all the patience and support. A special thank you goes out to my son, Samkelo, for accompanying me to the library and providing everything that I needed when studying.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Masters of Education dissertation to my late father, Sipho Agrippa Zondi (1964-2004). I remember how much you valued and prioritised education, encouraging us, your children, to study and be the best that we can be. It is for this reason that I have never stopped studying. As long as your memory is in my heart, dad you are never truly gone from my life and I hope I have made you proud thus far.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research study was to explore undergraduate students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. This study was motivated by two research questions: firstly, what are the undergraduate Geography students' experiences of assessments. Secondly, what are the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. Qualitative research methods: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used in the process of data generation in order to answer the two research questions. Geography 3rd and 4th year students that have either completed two Geography modules in a higher education institution made up the research sample. Students' experiences of their assessments related to the concepts of assessment fairness, appropriateness, interest and challenge. Students' experiences of fairness in their assessments consisted of their experiences related to time allocation for the assessment method, the geographical content available in the coursepack, a scope for assessments and the need for feedback. The findings from this study indicate that students value feedback and feed forward in assessment. In addition to this, the impact of disciplinary and English language acquisition in assessment was a key assessment experience... The study concludes by arguing that if assessments are fair and appropriate, students exhibit positive experiences of assessment, however, if assessments are unfair and inappropriate then negative assessment experiences are exhibited by students.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BEAR: Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research system

CAPS: Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement

CSHE: Centre for the Study of Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NCATE: National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education

NISE: National Institute for Science Education

SAQA: South African Qualifications Authority

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the entire research study. It reflects on the background and the nature of the research problem. This is followed by the problem statement, rationale of the study, the significance of the study, the aim and purpose of the study and the key research questions that form a basis for the study. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the research design and methodology as well as an outline of the thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of the challenges in students' experiences of assessment is that students are not adequately involved in their assessments. This concern about limited and/or a lack of student involvement in assessment activities in institutions of higher learning is a global phenomenon and not simply confined to South Africa. Boud & Falchikov (2007, p. 17) argue that "students are seen to have no role other than to subject themselves to the assessment acts of others. They conform to the rules and procedures of others". These authors suggest that students have not been given a meaningful role in assessment activities but instead they have to conform to their lecturer's demands without expressing their views and feeling about the assessments.

Hence, Freire (1970, p. 53) views the act of excluding students from assessments as "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits."

The view of students as depositories suggests that students are not provided a platform to share their experiences of assessment but instead it is the lecturer who makes assessment related

decisions and he/she does not consult students to find out how they have experienced that particular assessment.

Hence, Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001) assert the view of students being perceived as passive individuals when it comes to making assessment related decisions by stating that there is limited published literature on the views of students pertaining assessment. Different departments, stakeholders and organisations consistently stress the importance of student involvement in assessment activities as it allows them to learning effectively Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001); Smardon & Bewley (2007) & Toshalis, & Nakkula, (2012). According to Gilmore & Smith (2008, p. 6) “much of the literature and research concern students’ experiences of assessment is through the perspective of others, such as their teacher. Relatively little research has reported students’ perspectives on assessment experiences directly.” These authors suggest that there have been a few studies that have reported on students’ experiences from the students’ point of view instead more studies have reported on how lecturers think students have experienced assessments.

However, in recent years this trend is changing. Manik (2012, p. 94) states that “internationally the literature on assessment in higher education has seen growth in students as the unit of analysis.” Unfortunately, this cannot be said for South Africa because there have been very few studies on students’ experiences in the context of South Africa and none of them adopted a qualitative methodological approach (Manik, 2012). The absence of studies on students’ experiences of their assessments in South Africa located within qualitative methodologies controverts one of the aims of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the recent education curriculum revision in South Africa. CAPS promotes student-centred learning and exploring students’ experiences is aligned with student-centred learning because it engages students, allowing them to voice out their experiences of their assessments and their reasons for having such experiences which can provide insight to their lecturers and institutions of higher learning.

The reason why there has been a significant growth in the literature on assessment in higher learning where students are subjects, is because assessment matters. Assessment matters to

various stakeholders. Brown and Glasner (2003, p. 1) assert that “assessment matters to students, the tutors who assess them, the institutions in which they are assessed, the parents, partners and carers who support them, it matters to the employers who would like to offer them jobs on graduation and to the funders who pay for higher education”. Assessment should therefore be transparent so that it can provide the necessary information to different stakeholder as well as students themselves.

According to Brown (2004, p. 83) “current literature on assessment argues strongly that the process should be a transparent one, with criteria that are explicit and clear to all concerned (assessors, those being assessed and moderators reviewing the process) from the outset”. The arguments presented by Brown and Glasner (2003) and Brown (2004) bring us to one of the important roles of assessment, which is the provision of feedback to students, tutors, parents as well as university stakeholders. Thus, institutions of higher education especially assessors have a responsibility of providing assessment feedback to students.

In an academic setting, students can use tutor feedback to improve their content knowledge. Feedback can be used to minimize errors in students’ work (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2005). This is because lecturers assess students’ work and then inform them of where they have succeeded and where they had gone wrong. The lecturer would thus inform students about their strengths as well as the areas for improvement. The role of assessment is to thus make students more alert of their academic strengths and weaknesses (Weaver, 2006). This provision of feedback therefore helps in eliminating future errors in students’ work. Hence, Brown (2004, 84) students “also need feedback when they have done well, to help them understand what is good about their work and how they can build on it and develop further. The arguments put forward by the above mentioned authors suggest that all students require feedback in order to improve their capabilities.

Thereafter, when assessment feedback is provided to students, assessment would not then be seen as a tool to harm students, instead it would be seen as a tool to them to promote further learning. Interestingly, SAQA (2001) draws on how assessment can be perceived by commenting that assessment should be fair, it should not in any way hinder the student. It therefore coheres

that students must be involved in their assessments. They are one of the key role players in their assessment activities therefore their involvement in assessment activities is imperative. One of the ways of involving students in assessment activities is by exploring their experiences of the assessment tasks that they have completed.

Thus, awarding them a platform to reflect on their assessments, is this research study's intent. This study aimed at exploring undergraduate students' experiences of their Geography assessments and examining the reasons for the students having such assessment experiences.

The following section provides my rationale for the study as well as examples of studies that have been carried out in some parts of the world and they demonstrate that institutions of higher learning now realize that the involvement of students in assessment activities has significant advantages.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students have been experiencing challenges with their assessments. As a result there have been a number of departmental meetings with the student body, in order to try and resolve the problems. These meetings have not provided solutions to this problem and as a result, each every semester a number of Geography students report to the Geography Co-coordinator's office to express their dissatisfaction about the way assessment is carried out in the discipline.

The aim of this research study is to explore Undergraduate Geography Students' Experiences of their assessments and to establish why the Undergraduate Students have such experiences of their assessments. According to the University of Technology Sydney (2004) it is usual that students submit queries of their assessment mark and they are allowed to do so by scheduling an appointment with the subject coordinator within ten days of the release of the marks. This is similar to what is happening at the institution of higher education where the study was undertaken, students schedule appointments with the Geography coordinator to express their dissatisfaction about their assessment mark(s). However, as I mentioned previously this happens every semester which implies that the problem of Geography assessments is not resolved.

Smithers (2006, p. 1) reveals that “more than a third of university students are unhappy with the quality of assessment and feedback from teachers, according to national student survey results.” This survey is an example of a few studies that has sampled students to gather their experiences of assessment. My belief is that if there is an increase of studies that gather students’ experiences of assessment, there would be a decrease in the number of complaints that are raised by students with regard to assessment. Exploring students’ experiences of their assessments is therefore important as it gives the researcher an insight of students’ expectations and what makes them happy or unhappy when it comes to assessment as students might exhibit both positive and negative experiences of their assessments. The negative experiences can be used to engage students and coming up with solutions can help to solve the problems that they might have experienced.

1.4 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on Geography students’ experiences of their assessments and the reasons for them having such experiences of the assessments. Throughout my university life as a student, I do not recall anyone being concerned about my experiences of assessment. Geography was one of my majors and I struggled with the modules in terms of the assessment. My preparation efforts in tests, assignments and exams were never enough. I only managed to just pass my assessment but I could never achieve the marks that I anticipated for myself. Infact, I battled throughout my undergraduate life as a Geography student.

When I became qualified as a Geography teacher, the students that I taught were not excelling in their assessments. I then figured that the reason for the low marks that I was getting at university, as well as the low marks that my students were getting, it was because I did not have a say in the assessment activities and neither did my students. There was a lack of feedback from the assessments that I had completed for the Geography modules in my undergraduate studies and I was perpetuating this in my classes. I began reading around assessment and I came to the belief that the feedback from assessment could have possibly allowed me to improve in my future tasks as a Geography student. Due to the lack of assessment feedback and assessment support as a university student I was continuing a trend in my own teaching.

As a geography student I was never given an opportunity to express my views about the assessment tasks. It is for this reason I decided to embark on a journey of exploring Geography students' experiences of assessment and the reasons for having these experiences. This journey would give me closure about my own university assessment experiences and it also meant that I will have to read more on the subject of assessment in higher education so that I would gain more understanding about the phenomenon to then apply it in my own micro environment.

Exploring students' experiences of assessments is imperative because it gives lecturers an insight as to how students feel about the different assessment methods that he/she uses when assessing them. This would also help the lecturer to meet the students expectations when it comes to assessment, for example when students exhibit negative experiences of assessment, the lecturer can engage students in order to find out how can he/she improve future assessment. Hence, students would be playing an active role when it comes to assessment rather than being passive receiptants of assessment.

In the next section, I explore what assessment entails and well as students' experiences of assessment activities.

1.4.1 A brief Understanding of Assessment and students' Involvement in Assessment

Assessment is broad as a phenomenon and it includes all the activities that are performed by teachers and learners as efforts to provide information that has been acquired and this is required by all stakeholders involved in higher education (Black and William, 2004). Much of the literature on assessment in higher education focuses on lecturers' experiences of assessment. This is contrary to the view of assessment provided by Black and William (2004) who state that assessment is inclusive. If assessment is inclusive as they suggest, then students should be involved in assessment activities and there should be research undertaken through the lens of students. One of the ways of involving students in assessment activities is allowing them a chance to voice their experiences of assessment. This study has allowed Geography students to voice their experiences of assessment. Students were given an opportunity to comment on the

assessment activities that they have completed for either a Geography second year (Module A) or Geography third year (Module B)

There has been very little that has been documented about students' experiences of assessments throughout the world. Assessment is an important classroom practise and is imperative in informing the work that teachers do, however, much of the literature focuses on what teachers assess and the reasons for assessing (Bronowicz and Brookhart (2003) & Gilmore and Smith (2008). Researchers have been mainly concerned about the role of lecturers in assessment in the past fifteen years (Gilmore and Smith, 2008). In the past, it can be argued that institutions of higher learning have not foregrounded the value of research on assessments involving students which could explain why the student voice in assessment has not been heard. In recent years, there have been changes in the field of assessment and student involvement globally. It appears that institutions of higher education worldwide now realize the importance of involving students in assessment practices.

Changes in assessments that involve students have been occurring in the UK since the commencement of the twenty first century and Duffield and Spencer (2002, p. 7) highlight that "more recently in the UK, a strong case has been made for academics in higher education to work in partnership with students in the context of assessment." This suggests that the UK has realised the importance of involving students in assessment activities as this has proven to be beneficial to both students and the institutions of higher learning.

Hence, in other parts of the world, for example, in the USA it has also been observed that there is an emergent trend of involving students in assessment practices. Mennin and Kalishman (2001) have described the value of soliciting student feedback about assessment in the USA, after students were provided with assessment feedback and there was an improvement noticed in their assessment marks. Adams and McNab (2013) assert that assessment and feedback form an essential part of students' experience at university, as it affects how and what they learn, their study behaviour and their perceptions of the learning environment. It has been realized that exploring students' experiences of assessment is a way of gathering feedback from students and this can be used to plan and improve future assessments. Students would also feel important

when they are consulted about assessments because it is the very same assessment marks that determine whether they are ready to progress or not.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

According to Babbie and Mouton (2004, p. 35) “any research study has the possibility of filling the gap in a prevailing body of knowledge on a particular issue... this usually occurs when sound data is gathered during the process of data collection, an unconventional viewpoint may also emerge during the research process.” This research study on Geography students’ experiences is significant as it would aid in overcoming the limited studies that have been carried out on students’ experiences in South Africa as well as globally. This is because research on involving students in assessment has been growing over a few years but it has received more attention within the last ten years or so (Smith, 2008).

This study is significant as it is in line with what is taking place globally in recent years with regard to student involvement in assessment activities (as stated in section 1.3). This present study allowed Geography students to express themselves in the field of their assessments. It granted students democracy, allowing them an opportunity to voice their experiences of their Geography assessments and articulate the reasons for them having such assessment experiences.

Interestingly, South Africa is amongst the countries that did not recognize the importance of involving students in assessment practices (Hendricks, 1999). Manik (2012) also recently stated that internationally, there have been a number of studies on students’ views on their assessments but there are a few studies that are located in the context of South African students. This study aims to thus contribute to the literature on university students’ experiences of Geography assessments in a South African context, which is something that has not received much attention from South African researchers. Thus the literature on students’ experiences of assessments in the South African context is very limited, so this study would therefore aid in reducing the gap in the literature especially in the discipline of Geography education.

The nature of this study is also unique because various studies on students' experiences have adopted a quantitative methodological approach, and this study is one of the few studies that has adopted a qualitative methodological approach. Research studies on university students' views on assessment display a history of being methodologically tilted to large scale quantitative analyses (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden et al, 1997). Manik (2012) had argued that there are very limited studies in South Africa that have adopted a qualitative methodological approach. Her study was one and it explored undergraduate Geography students' views of their assessments and their academic results. This is one of a few studies in South Africa that has explored students' views using a qualitative methodological approach and appears to be the only one undertaken in Geography Education in a higher education institution.

It is for the above reasons that a study on South African university students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for such assessment experiences is of great importance.

1.6 AIM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the research study was to explore undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for having such assessment experiences in an institution of higher education in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The main purpose of this study was to give value to Geography students' voices and understand them with regard to the phenomenon of assessment in two Geography undergraduate modules. Students were given an opportunity to voice their experiences of their formative assessments that they had completed for either the Geography Module A or the Geography Module B.

1.7 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following key research questions have been formulated as a framework that drives the research project:

- What are the undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments?
- Why do undergraduate Geography students have such experiences of their assessments?

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section very briefly describes the research design and methodology used. A detailed description follows in Chapter three.

This study has employed a qualitative research design to explore undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. Creswell (1994) argues that qualitative research is a rational and individual process that is used to describe life experiences and how people make meaning of their experiences. Geography students' life experiences of their assessment were gathered, reordered and analysed. This study was located within the interpretive paradigm as it sought to understand participants' views. This was also in keeping with it being a qualitative study. The interpretivist research paradigm basically leans on qualitative approaches (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994a).

This interpretive research paradigm was better suited because the study sought an understanding of Geography students' experiences, and this study is undertaken through their lens. The research style that was employed by this study is the phenomenological case study, because according to Hoey (2011, p. 1) "a phenomenological case study is associated with any qualitative research project that aims to provide a detailed in-depth description of everyday life and practice." This research style is suited for this study because it explored the life of students in terms of their Geography assessments.

1.9 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The two instruments of data generation that were used were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. According to Kenyatta (2015, p. 41) "questionnaires are a useful method to investigate: patterns, frequency, ease and success of user needs, expectations, perspectives, priorities and preferences." Questionnaires were used to answer critical question number one,

that is, the experiences of the undergraduate Geography students with regard to their assessments.

Semi-structured interviews were the second instrument that was used to generate data for the study. Longhurst (2010, p. 103) states that “a semi structured interview is a verbal interchange where one person, the interviewer attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions.” Semi-structured interviews were useful to answer critical question number two, that is, the reasons for undergraduate Geography students’ experiences of assessment. The participants that formed part of this study were students that had completed either the Geography Module A or Geography Module B. This made them a suitable sample because they had experienced assessments for either one of the modules. The following section discusses sampling.

1.9.1 SAMPLING

The Education Centre (2006, p. 1) states that “a sample is a group of people, objects, or items that are taken from a larger population for measurement. The sample should be representative of the population to ensure that we can generalise the findings from the research sample to the population as a whole.” Purposive sampling has been suitable for this study because Patton (1990) states that purposive sampling is popular in qualitative research.

A purposive sample is selected because of the knowledge pertaining the population and the purpose of study, with the participants being selected because of a certain characteristic (Crossman, 2013; Strydom and Delport, 2005). Hence, this study’s intent is exploring Geography students’ experiences with regard to their assessments therefore it was only Geography student teachers that were sampled from particular modules accounting for purposive sampling. The key informants that were identified through purposive sampling were 2nd and 3rd year Geography student teachers that have completed one of the two Geography modules.

A pilot study using questionnaires was conducted first in order to test that the instrument could be used to obtain relevant data from the participants. This allowed the researcher to rework the questions in the questionnaire in order to ensure that the participants understand what is required in the questionnaires. The aim of the pilot study was to address weaknesses, misconceptions and problems in questionnaires so that they could be rectified before data collection took place. The reason being for this was that the questionnaires were e-mailed to participants in advance. Semi-structured interviews did not require a pilot study because the researcher was conducting the interviews in real time, and the participants would be able to seek clarity immediately if they were not sure of the questions.

1.9.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process of finding the data to answer research questions; it is about identifying the important patterns in the data collected (Leek, 2013). When data was analysed themes kept emerging, meaning that important patterns arose. This resulted in the usage of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from the questionnaires (open ended questions) as well as data from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was also found to be suitable for this study because Howitt and Cramer (2010) state that thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative analysis. Data derived from the semi-structured interviews was recorded in order to ensure that the information could be later transcribed. The data generated was then coded according to subthemes, this is where the important patterns emerged.

1.9.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance was already been obtained by the School of Social Sciences from the University of KwaZulu-Natal for an assessment project, and the researcher also applied for ethical clearance for this particular assessment study. Geography Module A and Geography Module B students were informed about what the study entailed and then they were given a consent form to read and sign. The form stated that, participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and no remuneration or monetary gain will be awarded for participating in the study. Participants were also informed that if they so desire, they were free to withdraw whenever the

need arises without providing the reasons for doing so to the researcher. The participants were informed that the information obtained from the study would be treated in the strictest confidence. (See chapter three for more detail).

1.9.4 LIMITATIONS FOR THE STUDY

In this section, I have discussed the limitations that I came across while doing the study. Firstly, this study was conducted in one higher education institution for specific modules therefore the findings cannot be generalized. Secondly, the study is undertaken in modules in a particular year with the students who have registered in that year and the findings can't be used to make assertions about students' assessments in previous years and for the future, other than providing some insights into students' experiences within that particular context and time frame. Lastly, I also completed both the modules in question in my undergraduate study, so I had preconceived ideas before going to the field for data collection and I actively set these aside in my mind as I had to now wear the 'researcher's hat'.

1.10 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This section outlines the various segments of the research report.

1.10.1 CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

This chapter provides an overview view of the entire research project. It reflects the background of the study and the nature of the research problem. This is followed by the problem statement highlighting what has contributed to the development of this study, the rationale of the study, significance of the study, the aim and purpose of the study and the key research questions that form basis of the study. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the research design and methodology as well as the outline of the study.

1.10.2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into different sections. The first section provides an understanding of assessment in education, the second section discusses the different purposes of assessment in education and the third section highlights assessment in higher education by looking at the history of assessment as well as how assessment is performed in higher education. The fourth section examines assessment challenges as well as student involvement in assessment activities. The fifth section discusses students' experiences that have been documented by different authors and the last section captures the theoretical framework as well as the conclusion to this chapter.

1.10.3 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the context of the research study, aim, objectives as well as the research questions for the study. It then describes the research design, focusing on the interpretive paradigm, qualitative research, phenomenological case study as well as, the sampling process which is also discussed. The chapter then discusses the methodology by explaining research methodology, as well as the significance of methodology in a research study. Lastly, it explains the research techniques, data analysis, the ways of ensuring trustworthiness, the ethical considerations taken and the limitations for the study.

1.10.4 CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents data generated from questionnaires as well as semi structured interviews. The analysis of data is then facilitated with interrogating the research questions. The findings from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews are then discussed by the use of thematic analysis.

1.10.5 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data generated from questionnaires as well as semi structured interviews. The analysis of data is then presented with the research questions, links to the

literature review as well as the theoretical framework indicated in chapter one and chapter two respectively.

1.10.6 CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides conclusions that are derived from the findings of the study, the summary of the study. Some recommendations in light of the study are also discussed in this chapter.

1.11 CONCLUSION

This research study sought to explore undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their formative assessments. It argues for the importance of involving students in their assessment activities. It is also a platform for granting Geography students a way to share their experiences of their assessments and articulating the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. The study is underpinned by the view that lecturers and students should work in partnership in order to ensure academic success in institutions of higher learning. This chapter has provided an overview of the entire research project. The following chapter is devoted to the literature review and the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

An overview of the complete study was presented in the preceding chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a broad understanding of assessment in higher education, as the focus of the study is Geography students' experiences of their assessment and the reasons for them having such experiences of assessment. Hence, this present chapter is divided into sections. The first section provides an understanding of assessment in higher education, the second section discusses the different purposes of assessment in education and elaborates on the value of assessment feedback.

The third section highlights assessment in higher education by studying the history of assessment as well as how assessment is performed in higher education. The fourth section examines assessment challenges as well as student involvement in assessment activities. The fifth section discusses students' experiences of assessment that have been documented by different authors and the last section captures the theoretical framework that informed the study as well as key assessment constructs in Geography Education before the conclusion to this chapter unfolds.

2.2 THE PHENOMENON OF ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Byrd (2013, p.1) "assessment is becoming increasingly important in higher education as a means for demonstrating and promoting quality in student learning." In order to understand Geography students' experiences of assessment, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the phenomenon of assessment. Taras (2005) points out that although assessment is of essential importance in education, the way that scholars define it differs. Taras (2005) further advises that, the development of assessment as well as its practicality will continue to face challenges until there is consistency and agreement in the way that assessment is defined. This argument suggests that problems associated with assessment will continue until various

stakeholders reach an agreement about the definition of assessment and the way that assessment should be carried out.

This section explores how various authors define assessment as well as what assessment entails in order to have a foundational understanding for use in this study. Understanding the concept of assessment in this study is essential because the aim of the study is to understand Geography students' experiences of their assessments, as well as the reasons for them having such experiences. Numerous scholars (Black & William, 2004; Singh, 2012) have discussed the phenomenon of assessment and the conclusion that has been reached by these authors is that like all popular concepts, assessment has different meanings.

Assessment can be defined as a process that helps teachers to understand learners' attainments and the level of their performances thus assisting teachers to report on the students' achievements (Hunt et al, 1996; Crooks, 2001). A teacher reports to various stakeholders about students' achievements and this includes parents, departmental officials as well as students themselves. The view presented by Hunt et al (1996) and Crooks (2001) suggests that assessment helps teachers to understand learners' achievements in order for them to draw conclusions about students' achievements. Assessment is therefore seen as a useful tool for teachers because through assessment they are able to tell how much knowledge the students possess. Judging from the way that the above authors have defined assessment, it is clear to see that according to them assessment is a tool that only benefits the teachers, by gauging the level of students' learning.

Conversely, according to Stately (1989, p. 2) "educational assessment is an omnibus term which includes all the processes and products which describe the nature and extent of children's learning, how it meets the aims and objectives of teaching, and how it relates to the classroom environment which is designed to facilitate learning." Black and William (2004) similarly assert a similar view of assessment by stating that assessment is all the activities and instruments used to assess as well as the assessment environment, thus assessment is also seen more widely as it provides more information to a number of stakeholders involved. There is a shift with regard to how assessment was defined in the above paragraphs, with Hunt et al (1996) and Crooks (2001)

suggesting that assessment was mainly about teachers since they stated that teachers use assessment to report on the students' progress.

In addition, Stately (1989) and Black and Wiliam (2004) argue that assessment includes both teachers and the assessment environment; and they do not view assessment as a process that benefits teachers only. These authors suggest that assessment is also beneficial to both teachers and learners, as it enables learning and assists in meeting the aims and objectives of teaching, ensuring that educational aims and objectives are achieved. This implies that students should be made aware of the aims and objectives anticipated during a learning process. There are two key role-players in assessment: the assessor and the assessed. If the aims and objectives of teaching are not achieved adequately, then assessment feedback to the assessed by the assessor may play a role to improve the students' future performance.

Hence, through assessment feedback students are made aware of their mistakes so that they do not repeat them in future assessment tasks and by assessing students, lecturers are able to observe whether the objectives of their teaching has been achieved or not. According to Higgins, Hartley and Skeleton (2002) assessment feedback is essential in achieving the goals of education by encouraging deep learning. Assessment is therefore imperative as it benefits both students and lecturers by ensuring that educational aims and objectives are achieved especially in developing students towards achieving deep learning.

An interesting perspective of assessment in the above is that assessment is seen as beneficial to students. Singh (2012, p. 115) states that "assessment is based on students' ability to construct new knowledge and to make use of this knowledge." This idea of assessment differs from the previous definitions of assessment above which only center on the value of assessment for the teacher. Singh (2012) places an emphasis on how students use knowledge, meaning that assessment is about students' knowledge construction as well as how this knowledge is used, contributing to the concept of deep learning. This is somewhat one sided again though because it excludes another key role player in assessment processes, namely the assessor (in this study the lecturers).

Authors such as Combrinck and Hatch (2012) similar to earlier authors affirm that assessment is about students only because they state that assessment is a process of gathering data on the students understanding of the work. Again, the emphasis is on the role of assessment in measuring how much information on students has been gathered over a period of time. This definition does not specify who gathers data from the students. The process of gathering data from students can involve a number of stake holders. Firstly, it could be a lecturer where he or she assesses students. Secondly, it could be peers through the usage of peer assessment where one student assesses the other. Lastly, it could also be the student herself through the use of self-assessment.

This study views assessment as part and parcel of teaching and learning and therefore accepts the definition put forward by Stately (1989) and Black and William (2004), and this is because of the way that they have defined assessment which views lecturers and students as the key role players in assessment processes, as this study's intention was to understand Geography students' experiences of their assessments and their reasons for having such experiences. Lecturers are responsible for setting assessment tasks and assessing their students. When this happens one can say that students and lecturers become key role players in assessment. According to Stiggins, (2007, p. 3) "teachers and students are partners in the assessment for learning process." This shows that assessment is a two sided coin: that students and lecturers should work together.

2.3 THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

According to Liu & Carless (2006, p. 1) "it is commonly accepted that there are two main purposes of assessment: a certification (or summative) purpose and a learning (or formative) purpose." This view reveals that there are two major purposes of assessment are to improve teaching and learning and pass or retain students. However it should be pointed out that there are various purposes that it serves. These include the provision of feedback, assessment as a motivational tool, diagnosing student difficulties, measuring improvements overtime and many more. This section captures some of the assessment purposes relevant for this study.

There are two major categories of assessment which are used in higher education: formative and summative and these are discussed below.

2.3.1 SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

According to Combrinck and Hatch (2012) historically South African universities have used examinations and tests as methods of assessing the skills and knowledge of students, and this is referred to as summative assessments as it comes at the end of a term/ semester. This indicates that summative assessment is the first category of assessment used in higher learning. Rolfe and McPherson (1995) define summative assessments as fixed, formal assessments that are given at the end of a prescribed period of instruction, they require students to give the sum of their knowledge, skills and attitudes that they have acquired over a period of time.

Hence, Coffey (2009, p. 1) also asserts the above view by stating that summative assessment are the “cumulative evaluations used to measure student growth after instruction and are generally given at the end of a course in order to determine whether long term learning goals have been met. Summative assessments are not like formative assessments, which are designed to provide the immediate, explicit feedback useful for helping teacher and student during the learning process.”

As highlighted above, summative assessment has quite a distinctive purpose. The above authors and Harlen and James (2006) describe summative assessment as gauging the learning that is achieved over a certain period of time, for example a semester. This is done for the purposes of reporting to parents, lecturers, the students themselves and to other parties interested in education, such as a board of directors. From the above definitions of summative assessment, one can therefore infer that summative assessment has an important role in the overall educational progress of students and this can be at the end of a semester, but not in the day to day teaching.

Johnson and Jenkins (2009, p. 19) assert that “Summative assessment is commonly referred to as *assessment of learning*, in which the focus is on determining what the student has learned at the

end of a unit of instruction or at the end of a grade level (e.g., through grade-level, standardized assessments). Summative assessment helps determine to what extent the instructional and learning goals have been met.” The authors have highlighted that summative assessments can be used to determine what a student has learned over a longer period of time, and this could be at the end of the term, semester or year. Most importantly, summative assessment is used to determine whether students can progress to another level or not, which is why they are undertaken after a longer period of time.

Biggs (1998) argues that the effectiveness of summative assessment depends on whether the students can bridge the gap between where they are now and where they would like to be in future. If students pass their summative assessments it means that they are a step closer to achieving their goal, which is passing (in the present study it is either one of the Geography education modules). Hence, if a student fails their summative assessments it means that they are widening the gap between where they are right now and where they would like to be in future, with repercussions for their graduation.

Summative assessment referred to as ‘assessment of learning’ has been discussed above. I now move my focus to particularly the second category of assessment used in higher education namely, formative assessment.

2.3.2 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

According to Yorke (2015, p. 1) “formative assessment is of critical importance to student learning.” This is because according to Johnson and Jenkins (2009, p. 1) “Formative assessment is commonly referred to as ‘*assessment for learning*’, in which the focus is on monitoring student response to and progress with instruction. Formative assessment provides immediate feedback to both the teacher and student regarding the learning process.” Judging from this view of formative assessment, it is clear that formative assessment is more frequent as an occurrence than summative assessment and that it takes place regularly since it is referred to as assessment for learning. Thus throughout the learning process the teacher will check if the students understand

the extent of the work being covered/completed before moving on to another concept/phenomenon/learning unit.

Moreover, Black and Wiliam (1998) define formative assessments as on-going assessments, evaluations and observations in the classroom. This means that formative assessments are indeed a continuing practise, taking place daily in learning environments such as classrooms as well as lecture halls. Thus, formative assessment provides students with feedback on their achievement during their course of a learning unit (Bull and Stephens, 1999). This implies that the use of formative assessment allows for immediate feedback during contact time, and a student can be provided with an immediate response through formative assessment because a teacher is there in class to respond to students. This is why it is said that formative assessment can improve learning for students (Black and Wiliam 1998; Taras 2007). Summative assessment on the other hand does not allow students to be provided with an immediate response, this is because they are written under exam conditions.

This study's aim is to explore students' experiences about their formative assessments. However, it was imperative to cover summative assessment in discussion because formative assessments do not exist in isolation. It is important to note that, although formative assessments are informal in nature and summative assessments are formal they both serve as effective indicators of students' performance (Johnson and Jenkins, 2009). Even though summative and formative assessments serve different purposes, they should be used as integrated forms of assessment as they are both used to determine a student's progress.

From the above argument made by Johnson and Jenkins (2009), one can tell that assessment can either be formal or informal. Furthermore, "formal assessments have data which supports the conclusions made from the test, formal or standardised measures should be used to assess overall achievement" (Weaver, 2006, p. 1). Therefore, the implication is that written documents such as controlled tests and examinations are regarded as formal assessments and the test scores from a student's test or exam script would serve as the data that would then support whether a student is ready to progress or not. Good performance in tests or examinations is imperative because it implies that a student is ready to progress. However, bad/poor performance in tests or

examinations would imply that the student is not ready to progress and he or she would have to repeat the module. Summative assessments are therefore regarded as formal assessments because they assess overall the achievement of a student.

According to Mifflin (1997) informal assessments usually take place in a causal manner, these include projects, experiments, oral presentations, performances, reading logs and literature discussion groups. Informal assessments are not standardised as formal assessments, for example, in informal assessments there can be group activities but in formal assessments students are expected to write exams as individuals. The author further highlights that informal assessments can be made more formal by specifying guidelines, for example, in letting students know what is required from them and frequently informal assessments may not contribute to a students' final mark. This implies that some formative assessments would be regarded as informal if they are not recorded and converted to summative assessments at the end of a semester.

Furthermore, Bull and Stephens (1999, p. 6) state that there is a blurring between formative and summative assessment because "in practice formative assessments are converted into multiple summative assessments." Various authors assert this view (Manik, 2012; Black et al, 2003 and Nitko, 1995). At the end of the semester or at the end of the year, formative assessments/ on-going assessments that students have completed during the progression of the module can be converted to a percentage and then added onto the exam mark which then becomes summative assessment. When the formative assessment mark is added to the summative assessment mark it means that both these marks determine the students' progress.

Thus, it is imperative that the students perform well in both the categories of assessment mentioned in this section so that they can progress. If students perform poorly in either one of the summative or formative assessments this could jeopardize their results because at the end of a semester or the year when they are added together they would determine progression.

2.3.2.1 ASSESSMENT FOR THE PROVISION OF FEEDBACK

Assessment and feedback form an important part of learning in higher education (Hounsell, 2003). Feedback is the information that students receive after they have submitted an assessment (Irons, 2008). This information should help to point out students strengths and weaknesses, assessment feedback can assist students to improve in future assessment tasks. A study carried out by Duffield and Spencer (2002) that surveyed medical students' views about the purposes and fairness of assessment, revealed that the majority of students, which is more than 95% agreed that providing feedback was one of the important purposes of assessment.

What is also important in this study is the construct of fairness, which I later discuss and use in the analysis. There are a number of ways that an assessor can use to provide feedback to students.

Lecturers can decide how to undertake their assessment feedback. For example, comments can be written on assignments that were handed in by students, assessment feedback can be given orally after a presentation, or it can also be given promptly during a learning activity which is not formally assessed (Yorke, 2003). Assessment feedback can be provided verbally or non-verbally and it can be provided to individual students or collectively to a group of students. This feedback is valuable because according to Wilbrink (1997) students require feedback in order to improve.

2.3.2.1.1 How feedback assists Students

Assessment feedback given to students has numerous functions, such as guidance on how the current assignment could be improved, advice on how future assignments can be made better and also in explaining or justifying a mark (Carless, 2006). The study by Duffield and Spencer (2002) on the fairness and purposes of assessment indicated that students are aware that one of the important purposes of assessment is the provision of feedback. Therefore, the implication is that students would welcome and engage with feedback from their respective lecturers because they would be aware that assessment feedback helps them to improve.

Indeed, “both teachers and learners agree that learners benefit from good quality feedback” (Jollands, McCallum, & Bondy, 2009, p. 1). This notes that assessment feedback must be given to students as it helps them identify their mistakes, and this would help them to improve their current knowledge as well as in assisting students in their future assessments, which is why it is said that assessment feedback improves learning.

Hence, Adams and McNab (2013) posit that assessment and feedback form a crucial part of students’ experiences at university, as it affects how they learn as well as selecting what to learn, the way that they study and their perceptions of the learning environment. Adams and McNab (2013) further state that indeed, assessment is one of the most important tools that teachers can use to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners. Assessment can indeed be used to influence students’ learning because students often ask whether a certain task mark will be recorded and if the answer is yes, they tend to take that task seriously. Students should therefore be presented with feedback after assessment practices have taken place since assessment informs what they learn as well as their perceptions of the learning environment if they don’t receive adequate feedback.

Other authors such as Alausa (2003) and Biggs (2006) posit that assessment feedback provides the necessary feedback required in order to maximise the outcomes of educational efforts. From these arguments, it can be observed that the provision of assessment feedback to students can assist them to improve since through assessment feedback students are made aware of their mistakes or weaknesses. Thus from their assessment feedback students should be able to tell why they had failed to reach the outcomes of their educational/learning goals. Hence, students can use the assessment feedback in order to improve in future assessment tasks. Black et al (2003) and Taras (2007) state that proper feedback should be provided in order to improve teaching and learning.

2.3.2.1.2 How Feedback assists lecturers

Lecturers can also utilise assessment feedback in their planning and teaching. Assessment feedback can reveal whether students have understood the work that has been covered or not, for

example if the majority of the students perform poorly in a particular assessment activity, this could be a sign that the lecturer needs to change his or her teaching methods. The lecturer can also use feedback from the assessments as a starting point to engage students about what kinds of assistance they require from him or her. This would assist him or her to identify students' needs and assist them to reach the educational outcomes desired. However, the danger is that although students welcome and value feedback from lecturers, lecturers do not do justice when providing feedback to students.

Hence, the following authors concur that there are feedback challenges, Ngwenya and Maistry (2012) when they state that although feedback is of importance in enhancing future learning, teachers see it as challenging and time consuming. If lecturers fail to provide the necessary feedback to students, it means that they are depriving them of the opportunity to improve in their future assessment tasks. In so doing, this would mean that assessment would not be serving one of its important purposes, which is providing feedback to students to improve learning.

Various authors mentioned in this section have highlighted that indeed one of the purposes of assessment is to provide feedback to both lecturers and students. The provision of feedback to students also serves as a motivational tool for learning.

2.4 ASSESSMENT FEEDBACKS AS A MOTIVATIONAL TOOL

Assessment feedback can also serve as a motivational tool for student learning. Koen (2012) views this as motivational engagement, with motivational engagement being defined as the students' drive to achieve their full potential. This argument is also evident in a number of discussions that were put forward by different authors (Harlen and James; 1997; Young, 2002; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). These authors argue that learning and feedback are inseparable and that feedback encourages students to work hard, and if students get positive feedback they might feel confident about themselves and their abilities and their results will improve.

However, if assessment feedback is negative it can go either way. Students can either work harder to improve their results or give up totally. A similar view is also shared by Yorke (2010) and Alton-Lee (2003) who state that positive feedback tends to encourage and negative feedback tends to discourage. Yorke (2010) further states that positive feedback is not only about praising the students work but it is about acknowledging students' strengths and indicating how he or she can develop further. Students are then encouraged to improve in current and future assessment tasks because the lecturer also highlights the areas that the students need to work on in order to improve their standard of work. Assessment and feedback work hand in hand, which is why Rowe and Wood (2008, p. 1) affirm that "effective and high quality feedback has been identified as a key element of effective teaching." Interestingly, high quality is not defined as either positive or negative feedback by Rowe and Wood (2008).

Thus, the findings from the studies conducted by the various authors mentioned above reveal that positive feedback can encourage students to reach their full potential. This is important because according to Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good & Dweck (2006, p. 75) "students' beliefs and goals can powerfully influence their learning success." In order to ensure that a student's full potential is reached, assessment feedback should be given as soon as possible (that is timeously). This implies that lecturers should be relatively quick when marking and that the feedback given should have meaning or make sense to the students. Thus, through feedback from assessment if students are encouraged to believe in themselves, good results can be achieved in the future.

2.5 ASSESSMENT AIMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The aim of this study is to explore students' experiences of their assessments, the assessments in question are the assessments that they have completed for either a second or third year Geography education module in one of the institutions of higher learning. This study therefore draws special attention to assessment in higher learning and thus knowing the goals of assessment in higher education/learning is valuable for the study.

2.5.1 GOALS OF ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER LEARNING

Internationally in developed countries, according to Wilbrink (1997, p. 1), “in the 1950’s and 60’s college enrolment was increasing and then in the 1970s it was discovered that the increment in student enrolment was not preparing students adequately for the workplace.” The result was that in 1984 and 1985 reports were tabled wherein the aim was to increase the quality of education, and these reports suggested that higher education should now be learner centred and that the learners required feedback in order to improve. Hence, this brings us to one of the essential aims of assessment in higher learning.

Thus one of the most important goals of higher learning is to prepare students for their professional roles (Hanrahan and Isaac, 2001; Gulikers et al 2006 and Knight 2002). Assessment assists in preparing students for employment because if students pass all their assessments it means that they will graduate and can begin their search for employment. But, if they fail their assessment tasks it means that they are not yet ready to graduate and therefore they will not be able to meet the needs of industry when they eventually apply for employment opportunities. Without assessment it would be very difficult to measure whether students are also eligible to graduate or not. Assessment is therefore imperative because it assists in meeting the goals and aims in higher learning and in the workplace.

Gibbs and Simpson (2004, p. 3) point out that “much evaluation focuses on what teachers do in class and that when teaching in higher education hits the headlines it is nearly always about assessment.” This is because assessment can be highly subjective because the lecturer awards marks and these marks can fail or pass a student. The marks awarded determine a students’ future. Generally, a student who performs well in his or her assessments would be more employable because they would be able to attain their qualifications timeously, which of course will aid in the institution’s good throughput rate. However, if a student fails the summative assessment tasks it means that he/she is not ready to progress and thereafter he or she will not graduate impacting on the graduation rates of the institution.

Indeed, assessment is a two way process given the above discussion and it should therefore include lecturers and students. Hence, Knight (2002 and also Adams and McNab (2013) argue that understanding assessment tasks is important for those interested in higher education. This implies that lecturers in higher education must have a good understanding on what they need to assess in order to train students to understand the importance of what they are taught and to develop the skills of what is required for assessment by the module being offered.

Moreover, Biggs (1998) states that if students understand the assessment tasks properly they are able to progress and they will end up graduating and if assessment activities are not understood they can end up performing poorly. A consequence thereafter is that graduating and job seeking opportunities are delayed. This implies that the gap between where they are right now and where they would like to be in future is widened because they would be required to spend more time in university repeating the modules that they have failed.

Assessing higher order thinking skills is another aim of higher education. Bostock (2006) posits that one of the aims of assessment in higher education is to assess higher order thinking skills. It is also asserted that lecturers should be able to make specific choices with regard to choosing methods of assessment that would be best suited to achieve the aims anticipated and they should assess what they have taught. By sharing the aims anticipated with students, lecturers will be preparing students for the assessment tasks. In so doing, they would be alerting students to take responsibility for their learning and prepare for the task which is building self-regulation in students.

Weiner (2010) states that self-regulation involves formulating goals, designing ways that will assist you to achieve those goals and having a plan B that one would fall back to if the goals are not achieved, time management and self-assessments also form part of self-regulation. This would be beneficial to students as well because they would plan ahead for assessments, manage their time effectively and also engage in self-assessment. In so doing, students would acquire higher thinking skills.

In order for higher thinking skills to be achieved assessment questions should begin from building students from low order questions to higher order questions. Assessment questions should ideally spread from low, to medium and to higher order to cater for all learners. Bloom's taxonomy built on cognition can be used to divide questions into various levels that cater from low order, to middle order as well as high order (Overbaugh and Schultz, n.d.). Assessment therefore plays an important role in determining students' future because it is used to report on their progress and if they have achieved the levels that their assessor has determined necessary for that module. If a student performs well in the assessment tasks it means that they are able to progress with their studies and eventually they will graduate and that would imply that they are ready to enter the employment sector.

Assessment that is used to progress or retain can also be said to be either objective or subjective assessments in nature.

2.5.2 OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Assessments can be further categorised under headings such as objective and subjective assessment. A lecturer chooses which method (either objective or subjective assessment) to employ when carrying out assessment activities.

Sousa (2015) states that objective assessment is a form of questioning that has one right answer or one way of expressing the same answer. Some examples of objective assessment questions include true/false type of questions, multiple choice questions, fill in the blanks questions and match questions. Certain objective assessments require low order cognitive skills because a student can play a guessing game and still get marks because no explaining is required, and students work with possible options that are in front of them since they can be given a choice of answers.

According to the Lyte Independent School District (n.d.) "Subjective assessment is a form of questioning which may have more than one current answer (or more than one way of expressing the correct answer). This definition of subjective assessment reveals that the type of questions

used in subjective assessments have more than one correct answer, it thus provides students with more freedom when attempting such questions. Hence, they require more depth than objective assessment because students have to explain and support their arguments with adequate substantiation to maximise their marks.

Subjective assessment is different to objective assessment because it requires students to explain their responses, and it has been asserted that subjective assessment requires middle and higher order thinking skills because students have to adopt a position and defend it (Brown, 2009). For an example, in an essay type of question students have to adopt a position and qualify their view. When students attempt to answer a question on the content that they have not studied, they will be faced with challenges in such an assessment because in-depth explaining is required in a subjective assessment.

According to Combrinck and Hatch (2012) objective assessment is better suited for on-line assessment and very large classes because there are computer programs that can mark these types of responses over a short period of time thus reducing the workload of the lecturer and assisting him/her to cope with large classes assessment. In recent years in SA, institutions of higher learning have been using objective assessments to cope with the ever increasing enrolment of students. This form of assessment is thus one of the strategies that can be employed to deal with the challenge of having to assess large classes in institutions of higher learning locally (Combrinck and Hatch, 2012).

2.6 ASSESSMENT METHODS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is a variety of methods that are used for student assessment in higher education (Struyven et al 2005). Assessment methods are also shaped by a number of factors for example a number of students that have to be assessed would determine the method of assessment that has to be employed. However, Manik (2012) posits that research studies have analysed only a limited number of methods such as essays, tests comprising multiple choice questions and portfolios in higher education. Hendricks, (1999); Combrinck and Hatch, (2012) have also emphasized that

tests, examinations and oral presentations are commonly used to assess students in higher education.

According to Mifflin (1997) it is fundamental to use a variety of assessment methods to assess students because students' abilities are not the same, for example, some students find written work difficult, therefore if a lecturer places too much reliance on it these students will suffer. Hence, there are numerous factors that should be considered before choosing an assessment method, these include the assessment purpose, intended assessment outcomes, the assessment method and the available resources (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Lecturers should, therefore, be in a position to design assessment tasks that would match the unique capabilities that the students have and also to consider the students' level of study, in other words assessment should be able to fit the desired purpose.

2.6.1 USING GROUP WORK FOR ASSESSMENT PURPOSES IN HIGHER LEARNING

According to Naylor and Martinez (2011, p. 3) "group work refers to learning activities (usually project based) undertaken by a number of students, resulting in an outcome presenting a single piece of assessment or a number of associated pieces of assessment." Gibbs (2011, p. 1) states that "group project work appears to offer teachers an effective way to engage students, to increase the complexity and challenge of the tasks that students gain experience working on." This infers that when students are given a group assessment, they have to meet on a regular basis in order to plan for the assessment that they have to complete. They have to work collaboratively in order to ensure that they perform well in that particular assessment task.

Group work is a form of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is an educational method to teaching and learning that involves a number of students working together to complete an assessment, this could be solving a problem, completing a task or designing a project (National Institute for Science Education (NISE), 1997). According to Gerlach (1994) in NISE (1997, p. 1) "Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the

participants talk amongst themselves. Learning occurs as a result of the talking with students sharing ideas while conducting a group work task.”

Collaborative learning is receiving enormous consideration in academic fields and it is connected to developing team work skills (Melles, 2004). Group work is also a form of co-operative learning which is commonly accepted as a methodology of teaching and learning in the sector of higher learning, which is also used for assessment purposes (White, Lloyd, Kennedy and Stewart, 2005). Team work skills are considered essential by institutions of higher learning because when the students graduate they are going to form part of the work force, where they will be required to display that they are capable of being team players.

According to Woodcock (2014 p. 1) “all employers are keen to recruit graduates who are able to cooperate, solve problems and work in teams.” One of the important aims of higher education is to produce students who are able to cope in the workplace. Group work can assist students in acquiring those skills that are essential in the professional world (Caruso and Wolley, 2008; Mannix and Neale, 2005). These arguments imply that when institutions of higher learning adopt group work as one of the methods of teaching and learning as well as a method of assessment, students are able to develop team work skills that they can use when they become employees in future. Communication skills are also developed through group work as group members have to engage in discussions whilst sharing ideas.

According to Davies (2009), although group work is a common form of assessment used in tertiary institutions, it is also important to note that group work as a method of assessing students has merits as well as shortcomings for students. One of the benefits of group work is that it encourages students to be active in their learning as it grants them an opportunity to learn from each other and it can also save a lot of time as it requires a shared workload (Kokemuller, 2015). Group work also breaks difficult tasks into understandable parts and steps, and it assists students to develop planning and time management skills and it builds stronger communication skills through students discussing and explaining as a team (Eberly Center, 2014).

It thus appears from the above discussion that, there is an agreement in the literature that group work as a method of assessing students adds meaning and value in teaching and learning. For example, lecturers also benefit from the use of group work as a method of assessment (Van Rensburg, 2012). When students submit group work, the number of pieces of work that the lecturer assesses is decreased, thus group work assessment might be more favoured by lecturers teaching very large classes (Center for the study of higher education, 2002). Group work assessment is thus portrayed as a relief method that lecturers can use when assessing a large group of students. The increase in student enrolment in institutions of higher learning has been discussed in this study as one of the challenges of higher learning. This is because lecturers encounter an increase in their workload, group work assessment can then be employed as a strategy to help them cope with the pressure of large classes.

2.6.1.1 Groupwork and the Concept of Fairness

Hence, academics realize the importance of implementing group work in teaching and learning as well as assessing using group work as a tool, however interestingly students do not like group work as they view it as an unfair (Naylor and Martinez, 2011). According to Kokemuller (2015) conflict in group work emerges from different attitudes, for example some group members might just want to pass while others want to achieve a distinction. In this case, students that just want to pass will not want to put extra effort to make their work more presentable while the ones who are concerned about distinctions would be slaving away. This becomes a problem as group members are working towards different goals, and the students who do the extra work deem group assessment therefore as unfair because the effort that each student contributes varies yet a common mark will be allocated to the entire group in the assessment.

According to Sarkisian (2010) the biggest criticism about group work from students is that it takes a lot of time and planning and students can become confused about the work that they have to complete. Arranging a suitable venue and common free time to discuss a way forward for the completion of the group work assessment is seen as a difficult task for students because they attend different courses. It becomes even more difficult if lecturers do not share their expectations with the students with regard to the assessment task. It is hard to attempt a task

without knowing the expectations and without having enough guidelines to assist you during the process.

In a study undertaken by Van Rensburg (2012), one of the key issues that emerged with the implementation of group work assessment is ensuring fairness in terms of allocating marks according to individual contributions and the management of the students that have not contributed to the work. One of the strongest challenges that the students shared about group work is that the way that group work assessment is carried out may not fairly assess their individual contributions (Center for the study of higher education, 2002) as earlier stated.

Hence, the above arguments reveal that most of the time when lecturers assess group work tasks they assess the work collectively without establishing whether all group members have contributed equally to the task or not. This becomes a problem because even students who did not contribute anything will end up with getting the same mark as the students that have contributed to the completion of the task. When this happens group work assessment is said to be unfair by students which is why some students do not approve of this method of assessment (Smith, 2006).

2.6.1.2 Students' Other Views on Groupwork

A study carried out by Weimer (2012 p. 1) on groupwork revealed that “students don’t always like working in groups, she asked for their top 10 reasons why students don’t want to work in groups and they offered this list:

- It’s hard to focus during small group exercises.
- We are always rushed.
- Group work exercises mean we do the work and the teacher doesn’t.
- We’re trying to work on material we didn’t understand in the reading.
- If we want to work in groups, we can form them on our own, in class we could rather hear someone who understands the material explain it.
- We’re all confused, getting in a group merely compounds the confusion.
- I don’t like the people in my group.

- Group members don't show up and don't contribute.
- We'd get through more material if you lectured.
- I can't sleep during small group exercises".

Participants in the above mentioned study by Weimer (2012) have raised quite a number of issues justifying why they do not like group work assessments. They have indicated that time constraints are a problem when it comes to group work because you have to follow a schedule for meetings to discuss the assessment task. It appears that at times students are not given a choice to choose their group members which is why they do not like the people in their groups. Students also stated that group work is confusing especially when they are given topics that they do not understand and they also do not understand the lecturers' expectations. Group members that do not show up for meetings and do not contribute ideas make matters worse as other students have to do the work for them.

In contrast to the above view, an investigation of undergraduate students' feelings and attitudes towards group work and group assessments carried out by White et al (2005) which revealed that the students that were surveyed in this study favoured group work more than individual work. Findings from this study concur with those of Mills (2003) and Barfield (2003). These authors presented findings that in most cases students reported that group work was an encouraging experience for them and that they relished working in a group.

Also, Cantwell and Andrews (2002) assert that students' attitudes and feelings towards group work were more positive after the students completed the group work activity awarded to them. These authors have presented that, there is a number of students that realize the importance of group work and they had positive experiences after completing group work assessments. This argument reveals that at times, students might have negative comments about group work assessment prior to the task and then later change their comments after completing a group assessment task. This shows that timing when group work assessment is analysed out can display different results.

It thus appears that from the arguments presented by the authors above, there were two views put forward about students' experiences of group work assessment in institutions of higher learning. It was revealed by the studies presented above that some students have negative experiences of group work assessment due to many reasons and as a result they dislike group work assessment, which means that these particular students may prefer to be assessed individually. Whilst others have had positive experiences of group work assessment and they may prefer it over individual assessment if used comparatively.

2.6.2 SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A FORM OF ASSESSMENT USED IN HIGHER LEARNING

According to the University of New South Wales (2014, p. 1) "student self-assessment occurs when learners assess their own performance." The University of Reading (2014) states that self-assessment is widely used in institutions of higher education, as it requires students to reflect and assess their own work to see how they have performed using assessment criteria provided by lecturers. The benefits of engaging students in self-assessment are enormous.

Hence, through self-assessment, students can learn to reflect on their learning, be able to point out their strengths and weaknesses in terms of their abilities and learn independently and be critical thinkers (UNSW, 2014). Self-assessment also provides a unique platform to students to test their abilities or to discover what they know by themselves instead of being told by a third party. Self-assessment can be used in a variety of ways.

In addition, Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001) argue that self-assessment encourages students to set goals and learn independently. Self-assessment is therefore essential as it involves students in assessment practices. Through engaging in self-assessment, students can compare their work and marks over time and work towards finding a solution towards their weaknesses. Also, when students are involved in this form of assessment they develop the habit of self-reflection (Houghton, 1997). In this instance, student self-assessment is portrayed as a tool that a student can use to monitor his or her progress over time. By engaging in continuous self-assessment tasks, a student may discover his/her weaknesses that hinders him or her from achieving certain

marks and it will then lead to the student working towards achieving the desired goal, with the student having to come up with strategies that would assist him or her to improve his/her performance.

Lecturers can also benefit from the use of self-assessment, for example Melon (2013, p. 1) states that “one way to gather feedback on students’ prior knowledge and skills is to ask them to assess their level of knowledge or skills.” Lecturers can give students self-assessment tasks to test their understanding of previously learned content. This view of self-assessment implies that, in some cases self-assessment is not used to promote or retain students or perhaps award them with marks. But instead, it can be used to assess students’ prior learning. According to Brooke and Andrade (2013, p. 1) “Self-assessment is not a process by which students determine their own grades”. As no mark allocation is involved in this practice.

Thus, instead of assuming that students have acquired certain skills in previous modules related to the content that a lecturer has to introduce, a lecturer can possibly give students a self-assessment task to complete. This would help the lecturer to gauge whether the student had acquired the desired skills from previous modules or not. Using the feedback from the self-assessment task, the lecturer can then structure his/her work programme according to the findings gathered from the self-assessment exercise. In this case, students will also benefit because they are able to see whether they had acquired the skills that they are expected to have or not, so that they can learn them again if there is a need.

A study carried out by Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001) on students’ views on peer and self-assessment reported that students benefit from engaging in self-assessment, and this can be observed in the following comments: One of the students in the study reported: “*Self-assessment made me more aware of what I needed to do to improve my assignment.*” Another student in the study said: *Doing a self-assessment made me look at my assignment more critically than I normally would have*”. And another student in the study said that by engaging in self-assessment “*you realise what markers are looking for (a new experience for me and very valuable) It helped me see more clearly some of the skills I need to focus on in my essay writing.*”

Hence, these comments above from students have highlighted that these particular students benefited from engaging in a self-assessment. The first two students learnt more about what is expected from them in terms of essay writing assignments, by engaging in self-assessment the two students were able to see where they have gone wrong while writing their essays. Whist, the third student was exposed to the marking criteria which helped him or her to understand the marking process of essay assignments, and learning more about the marking of essays helped him or her to learn the skills that he/she was lacking in his or her essay writing. This is an example of how self-assessment develops critical thinking in students.

2.7 ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Combrinck and Hatch (2012, p. 81) “Higher education institutions world-wide have experienced growth in students enrolments.” The number of students in the United Kingdom (UK) higher education institutions is projected to continue to rise, there is also an increase in the number of international students that have enrolled at UK universities (O’Prey, 2014), and this is combined with an increasing diversity of students (Stewart, 1995). Similar trends have emerged in South Africa, with the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p.3) having revealed that “almost one million students (938 201) were enrolled in South African public higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2011.”

In 2012 there was a significant increment in the number of students that enrolled in higher education, and the statistics reveal that they were 953 373 registered students in tertiary institutions of South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). These statistics reveal that there was in growth of about 15 172 in student enrolments over a period of a year. But there is a lack of higher education academics and hence, the increase in the enrolment of students in tertiary institutions poses a challenge to assessment because it means that lecturers’ workloads are increasing as well as that they have to assess many students over a short period of time as modules are now semesterised.

In order to cope with the above pressure also demonstrated in overseas countries previously, Biggs (1998) states that teaching is carried out in large classes and assessors end up using

assessment methods that require low intellectual levels such as recall of unrelated concepts of knowledge and assessment content that does not represent what is prescribed in the curriculum. Biggs (1998) adds that because of the large classes, assessors end up using assessment as a tool of comparing students against one another, where by those who did not perform well are told they cannot cope. An example of low intellectual level activity that is used to test students would be multiple choice questions, as these largely require a low cognitive level. When students answer multiple choice questions they do not engage in abstract thinking, and a student can always guess and perhaps get the response right as earlier stated. Multiple choice questions are favourable to those lecturers with large classes because they are able to mark these types of questions quickly if they don't have access to technology to do the marking electronically.

Thus, this compromises assessment and learning and thereafter one of the aims of higher learning, and assessing high order thinking skills as mentioned earlier is not achieved. If students perform low cognitive level activities, it will adversely affect their ability to undertake higher order thinking. At the end of the day these students would end up in workplaces and would not be able to properly fulfil their duties as employees if higher order thinking is required. It was mentioned earlier on that assessment is not only about mastering what is learnt in class but it is also about preparing students for future employment.

2.7.1 New Assessment Methods to Cope with Large Classes in HEIs

The Centre for the study of Higher Education (2013, p. 1) asserts the that “the growing size of the student body is the significant in the day to day decisions academics are making about assessment methods, larger classes have encouraged academic staff to look for time efficient assessment techniques.” Alausa (2003) posits that major problems of assessing learners have been in the approaches or methods. Approaches and methods of assessment become problematic when they do not achieve the aims and objectives that are set out for the learning programs.

The methods of assessments used should be in line with the students' cognitive levels, and assessment processes should be made transparent to students so that they can take responsibility

for their learning. Changing assessment methods is imperative due to the increasing class numbers because lecturers spend a lot of time marking and then capturing the students' results. New assessment methods that take less time to carry out are perceived as a way to resolve large class sizes, and lecturers have to work with students with regard to any new assessment resolutions because this would affect them also.

A study carried out by Combrinck and Hatch (2012) is a perfect example of assessment initiatives that are used locally in order to cope with the increasing number of students' enrolments in higher education. This study proposes the introduction of continuous assessment to overcome the challenge of the increasing class sizes. The authors' further state that continuous assessment works because it is designed to accommodate the logistical complications associated with large class teaching and that it places the student at the center of a learning process. If students are at the center of the learning process it means that they become actively involved in their learning. Continuous assessment as suggested by Combrinck and Hatch (2012) is a favourable method because it takes place throughout the semester. Continuous assessment allows students to identify their mistakes timeously and work towards correcting them because feedback is given on a more frequent basis.

The provision of feedback to students has also been a major challenge due to the rising numbers of students in institutions of higher learning. A major tendency in universities in recent years has been an increase in both numbers and diversity of students, this can present challenges in delivering good feedback (Holmes and Papageorgiou, 2009). As a result, there has been great pressure for academics especially those with heavy workloads when they have to deliver feedback formally to students. When assessment feedback is not provided to students or when the provision of feedback is poor, one of fundamental purposes of assessment is not met, which is the provision of good feedback.

2.7.2 Language Barrier as an assessment challenge

According to Botes & Mji (2010, p. 123) "Language and education are interrelated because all teaching is given through a medium of instruction. In the South African context linguistic

diversity is a complex issue.” South Africa is known as a rainbow nation since it has eleven official languages. The students who were taught in different languages during their schooling years would then proceed to institutions of higher learning where the main language of instruction is English in many institutions and Afrikaans in others.

The number of students who do not speak English as a first language is said to be growing in recent years not only in South Africa, similarly other countries has also witnessed this development. McNally (2012, p. 14) notes that “the number of non-native speakers of English in schools in England has increased by a third over the past 10 years. Now, roughly one in nine children do not speak English as a first language.” It is important to note that some of these students are going to proceed to institutions of higher learning once they have completed their schooling years.

This trend has also been reported in the United States of America with Elsworth & Dean (2013, p. 1) reporting that “millions of children in nations around the world enter classrooms each year unable to speak the same language as the teacher. In the United States alone, English language learners are one of the fastest-growing populations within the educational system.” The increase in the number of students in institutions of higher learning around the world poses a challenge, as institutions of higher learning, would have to come up with strategies that would assist students that might be facing language difficulties as a result of English not being their home language in order to ensure that effective teaching and learning takes place. This would ensure that the most important goal of an educational institution is reached, this goal is teaching and learning.

Geography as one of the modules offered in institutions of higher learning would also be impacted by language barrier, as Geographical content is delivered in English. Students are also expected to write their assessments in English and also during contact time students are expected to express themselves in English regardless of whether it is their home language or not and the institution where the present study was carried out is located in a province where IsiZulu, is the most common language spoken by the majority of people.

Authors such as, McNally (2012) note that some critics fear that the quality of education is compromised due to the language barrier, this is because teachers' workloads will increase as they have to provide extra help to learners who do not speak English as a first language. Consequently, students also face difficulties, as they are required to understand the assessment questions before attempting them, this then impacts on the quality of education because if they do not grasp the question they perform poorly in their assessments.

According to Botes & Mji (2010, p. 125) "learning and teaching in multilingual classrooms where the medium of instruction is not the learners' home language is a complicated matter." This is because learners are introduced to different terminologies that are associated with the learning area, for example in a Geography classroom there are Geographical terms that students need to understand as well as the new language of instruction that they have to adjust to, in this case English would be the medium of instruction. This suggests that students who are English second language speakers have to learn two languages (Geographical terminology as well as English) which is why they are likely to experience language barriers.

Understanding English is essential in Geography education. This is because "English is the main language of literacy and the main written medium of instruction throughout the education system" (Mooznah & Owodally, 2014, p. 198). As highlighted previously, students understanding of English is important because they are taught in this language and if they fail to understand the content that they have been taught, it is highly likely that they would perform poorly in their assessment because they will not understand the questions. In some cases, they might understand the question but fail to express themselves properly as per language or technical jargon (geographical concepts) requirements.

The acquisition of English language skills is necessary in Geography education is also important for co-operative learning as well as self-assessment. Henderson & Wellington (1998, p. 35) reveal that "it is important for students to explore their own views and those of others in order to develop an independent way of thinking. To do this we must provide opportunities to practise the social skills of communicating and collaborating." Being in a multi-lingual classroom could also be problematic when it comes to group work as students would be required to work together to

complete tasks, and group work requires students to brainstorm and they need to communicate ideas in order to ensure that they produce the best work for assessment. This would be very difficult to accomplish if the students cannot understand one another.

Moreover, Elsworth & Dean (2013, p.1) state that “children experience higher failure rates in school if the language they learn at school is different from the one spoken at home”. This is why institutions of higher learning have to develop strategies that would assist students that are not English first language speakers to lift the language barrier. In so doing, educational institutions would be ensuring that fair assessment of students’ abilities takes place as this is one of the purposes of assessment.

2.8 A NEW APPROACH: INVOLVING STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENT

According to Bronowicz and Brookhart (2003) assessment is an important practise that happens in a classroom and is crucial in informing the work that teachers do, however much literature focuses on what teachers assess and the reasons for assessing. This implies that most literature focuses mainly on the teachers’ role when it comes to assessment, and assessment is therefore seen as something that is done to students as has earlier been stated. It is all about the teachers carrying out assessment tasks and their reasons for doing so. Students on the other hand do not have much input when it comes to their assessments.

Research on involving students in assessment has been growing over a number of years but it has received much attention within the last ten years or so (Smith, 2008). One of the ways of involving the students in assessment is by exploring their experiences. Smith (2008) further indicates that most of the research on assessment looks at how assessment influences instruction as well as what kind of assessment teachers prefer, and very little focus has been paid to how students receive the assessment. This argument by Smith (2008) suggests that there have not been a number of studies that have focused on how students experience assessment. It appears that this author shares a similar view to Bronowicz and Brookhart (2003), who also stated that much literature on assessment has focused on teachers and assessment and students’ experiences have been ignored.

The exclusion of students from assessment processes has led to a number of questions. For example, much earlier Brophy (1999, p. 75) raised an important point when he asks “But what do students think about their classroom assessment?” This author has raised an important question that this study has attempted to also answer because there are still insufficient studies in Geography on students and assessment. In this present study, by exploring undergraduate Geography students’ experiences of their assessments, the students have revealed what they think about their Geography assessments in two modules. One can conclude that this study has provided the Geography students an opportunity to voice their opinions about the assessments that they have completed them because its main intention was to gain insight into students’ experiences of their assessments.

The stance adopted by the three authors above is that students have been ignored when it comes to assessment practices and that is why there is limited literature with regard to their experiences of their assessments. Smith and Smith (2007) state that the student voice in assessment and learning has been an undertone, if not silent. It appears that there are various authors that assert that students have not been involved in their assessment practices. One may then argue that students have not been actively involved in their own learning because they have been excluded in decisions that involve their assessments.

In recent years, it appears that institutions of higher education worldwide realized the importance of involving students in assessment practices. Duffield and Spencer (2000, p. 879) highlight that “more recently in the UK, a strong case has been made for academics in higher education to work in partnership with students in the context of assessment.” In the USA, Mennin and Kalishman (2001) have described the value of soliciting student feedback about assessment. The need for exploring students’ experiences seems to be increasing in the recent years worldwide, and this means that students are now seen as important role players in education. South Africa is amongst the countries that historically did not recognize the importance of involving students in assessment practices (Manik, 2012).

As stated above, the notion of exploring students’ views in South Africa has not gained much popularity in the field of research. However, attempts are being made to involve students in

assessment practices. In South Africa research on students' views about their assessment is a rising new trend (Manik, 2012). This study would therefore add to the literature about the views, perceptions as well assessment experiences of students in one context in South Africa. This present study is unique in a sense that it is qualitative in nature, as highlighted above, and other studies have used quantitative and mixed methods approaches to study students' experiences of assessments. This study therefore adds a new dimension to exploring students' experiences of their assessments.

2.9 THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN ASSESSMENT

When students are involved in assessment practices they become motivated to attempt the assessment tasks, thus there is a chance of working to achieve good marks. Taras (2003) suggests that the reason why undergraduate students are finding it difficult to assimilate feedback of their work from the lecturers and tutors is because they were historically excluded from assessment activities. There have been cases where students complained about their assessment marks, and this could be avoided if assessment is transparent from the beginning where students are made aware of what is required by the assessment tasks that they have to complete.

This present study has involved Geography students in their assessments by allowing them an opportunity to share their experiences of assessments and the reasons for their experiences. If assessment requirements are made transparent to students beforehand, students would realise that lecturers and tutors are not there to fail them but they are there to help them improve. The findings from studies carried out by Struyven et al (2005) and Bailey and Gittos (2006) on students' experiences of assessments suggest that, students' perceptions about assessment greatly influence their attitude to studying and learning.

Correspondingly, Entwistle (1991) also earlier provided similar views by stating that students' perception of the learning environment determines how they learn. Often, students enquire about assessment tasks wanting to know if they are for marks. If a lecturer says yes, they tend to take that piece of work seriously and if they are required to write a test they also tend to take it

seriously and learn for it because they know that it will contribute towards their overall achievement.

According to Dochy et al (2006, p. 5) “involving students in assessment is perceived as being valid, reliable, fair and as contributing to a growth in competence.” These authors have highlighted that involving students in assessment brings about fairness, this implies that not involving students in assessment practices is an injustice and unfair. By involving students in any activity involving assessment it means that you are allowing them to achieve because they would know from the beginning what is required of them.

However, Dochy et al (2006) further state that other areas need further research, and this implies that although some scholars feel that students should be involved in assessment activities they are unclear about what should be done in order for them to confidently say that students have been involved in assessment activities. The position adopted in this research is that there is a correlation between assessment and learning. Authors Bull and Stephens (1999) adhere to this view by stating that students’ learning is determined by assessment. These authors have highlighted that assessment plays a vital role in shaping what is learnt, and this is because assessment is closely associated with objectives or aims that are anticipated with the learning process.

Thus, if assessment practitioners such as lecturers do not make assessment tasks transparent to students they would be denying students the ability to perform well in assessment tasks, and this might lead to negative effects which could be failing and repeating the module. Various authors have put forward that there could be positive effects if students are involved in assessment practices, for example Stiggins (2007, p. 3) reveals that “assessment for learning begins when teachers share achievement targets with students, presenting those expectations in student-friendly language accompanied by examples of exemplary work.” This assists students in knowing what is expected of them by the lecturer and students can work towards achieving the desired results.

This study presents Geography students with an opportunity to voice their experiences about their assessment tasks and the study further explores the reasons they provide for them having these experiences.

2.10 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENT

In the following sections, students' experiences of their assessment and studies related to students' experiences are discussed. Students' experiences of the assessment tools are captured under this section. One of the core functions of assessment is to provide feedback. Assessment feedback is useful for the lecturer as well as students, as it helps them to see if their learning objectives have achieved or not. In order for assessment activities to be carried out, assessment tools are needed. This is why the researcher felt that student' experiences of the assessment tools needed to be explored.

2.10.1 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

A survey carried out by Mizrahi (2013, p. 1) on assessment methods revealed that “the method of assessment undergraduate students feel mostly comfortable with is multiple choice assessment, an objective assessment. During the course of the survey, the majority of the students (48%) stated that they prefer multiple choice questions and it was only 3% of the undergraduate students that indicated that they prefer long essay questions.” The results also stated that the method of assessment undergraduate students feel least comfortable with is long essays.

Correspondingly, Greiss (2013, p. 1) asserts the above view of assessment by stating that “in my experience, it seems to me that my undergraduates also prefer multiple choice exams too and short answer assessment tasks.” The possible reason for students liking short questions could be that they also require lower cognitive demands than essay questions. Multiple choice questions tend to limit thinking because in most cases students are presented with four responses that they have to choose between.

It is also imperative to note that other students have different experiences with short questions. Hence, student 18 in a study by Manik (2012) stated “I think short questions aren’t for me because they limit how I express what I think.” The student’s experience suggests that short questions do not provide this student with an opportunity to share her thoughts and experiences. Short questions are very specific in nature, and thus require students to provide responses to the question. Similarly, another student in Manik’s study (2012) commented “I am not very confident with short questions. *I feel I need to plan my time better. For example, something for 5 marks, I’ll write 10 lines instead of 5 points.*” This comment reveals that some students are not even sure how to approach responding to short answer questions by adequately summarizing the relevant information so they end up disliking this type of assessment. The student also needed to write according to the mark allocation.

It is thus very evident from the various studies that students vary in their likes and dislikes associated with the different assessment tools. By far though, multiple choice questions were favoured as an assessment tool.

2.11 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Swanson (2013, p. 1) “Theories are formulated to explain, predict, and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions.” Another definition by Trent University (2014) defines a theoretical framework as a framework that provides a specific perception or insight that is used to scrutinize a topic. From these definitions we learn that a theoretical framework provides guidance to the researcher to make meaning of the phenomenon. The researcher has used one theoretical framework for this study, namely the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research (BEAR) system.

2.11.1 THE BEAR ASSESSMENT SYSTEM AS A THEORETICAL INSIGHT

The Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research system is commonly known as the BEAR assessment system and it was developed by the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research Center (Wilson and Carstensen, 2007) and it provides the framework for what is considered to be a ‘good assessment’ approach as will be explained below. Wilson and Sloan (2000, p. 2) define the BEAR assessment system as “an integrated approach to developing assessments that provide meaningful interpretations of student work relative to the cognitive and developmental goals of a curriculum.” The system has four principles or four building blocks that are tools that can be used for to create meaningful assessments in order to ensure that the goals of the curriculum and teaching are met (Wilson, 2005) and it also allows for students’ experiences of their assessment to be understood.

Wilson and Carstensen (2007, p. 313) assert the view that “the BEAR Assessment System is based on the idea that good assessment addresses these considerations through four principles: (1) a developmental perspective, (2) a match between instruction and assessment, (3) the generating of high-quality evidence, and (4) management by instructors to allow appropriate feedback, feed-forward, and follow-up”. Different authors have presented the BEAR assessment system and from their arguments it is evident that the BEAR assessment system puts student at the center of assessment activities.

This is because the system argues that assessment should serve as means of developing students, it also states that what is taught must be aligned with what is assessed, in so doing lecturers can be able to use results from the students assessments to gauge whether students have understood the work or not. Thereafter, provide feedback and feed forward to students and monitor their progress from there onwards.

The following diagram (figure 1) displays the four principles of the BEAR assessment system its four building blocks (construct definition, item design, measurement model and outcome space definition).

The Building Blocks and Principles of the BEAR Assessment System

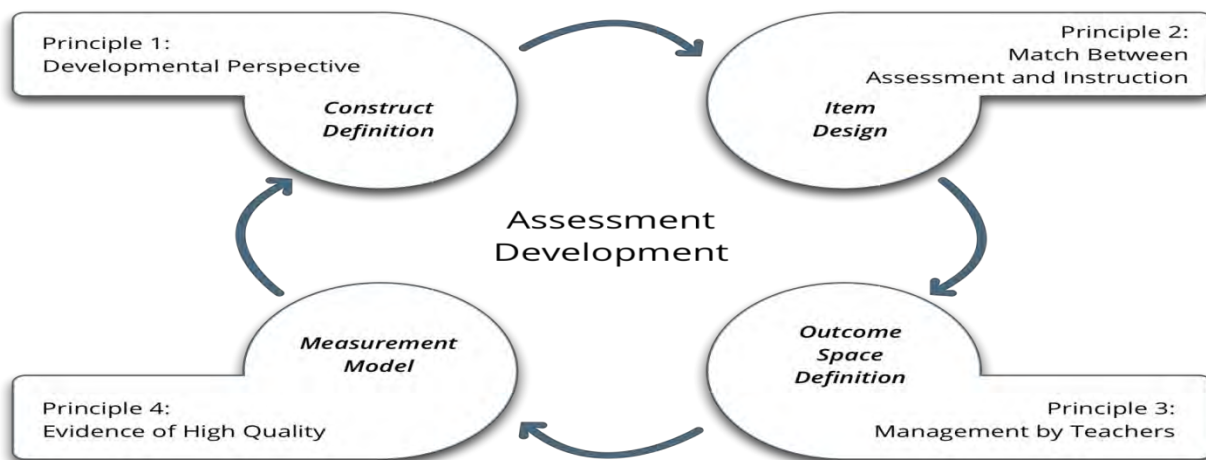


Figure 1. The Principles of the BEAR assessment system adapted from

<http://bearcenter.berkeley.edu/page/about-bear>

PRINCIPLE ONE: DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

The first principle of the BEAR Assessment System suggests that assessment should serve a developmental perspective for the students. Assessment which is concerned with the developmental perspective of students involves examining whether students have understood the concepts and skills that were taught over a short period of time, this is in contrast of examining a students' performance after a long period of time or a final stage (Wilson and Carstensen, 2007) as with a summative assessment. According to Johnson and Jenkins (2009) formative assessment is assessment frequently called 'assessment for learning' since its intention is establishing whether students have understood instructions or not.

Hence, the above suggests that there is a connection between formative assessment, which is an on-going classroom assessment and students' development. The lecturer can collect immediate feedback by engaging with students to examine whether they have understood the content that has been taught or not. Assessment feedback can be used to provide guidance to students on how the latest assignment could be improved, guidance on how upcoming assignments can be improved and to explain why a student has attained a certain mark (Carless, 2006). Hence, "the goal of formative assessment is to monitor students' learning to provide on-going feedback" (Eberly Center, 2013, p.1).

Careless (2006) and the Eberly Center (2013) assert that attaining feedback from students on a regular basis assists in the developmental perspective of a student. As students are told what they have done wrong and what they can do to attain better marks in future. It also helps to prepare students for future assessment tasks. The lecturer is able to diagnose problems on an on-going basis rather than leaving them to the end of the semester where they have to complete their summative assessments.

PRINCIPLE TWO: MATCH BETWEEN INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

The second principle of the BEAR assessment system states that there should be a match between instruction and assessment. Instruction refers to “effectively teach what students should know and be able to so it becomes the delivered curriculum” (Tweed, 2007, p.9). Assessment is used to gather how much students have learnt over a period of instruction. Eberly (2013, p. 1) states that “assessment should reveal how well students have learned.” There is a close link between instruction and assessment which is why authors such as Draney (2009) and Biggs (2003) assert that there should be an alignment between instruction and assessment because assessment should gauge the students’ level of understanding of what has been taught.

The alignment between instruction and assessment must occur at the level of the classroom because it is where ongoing assessments to check students’ progress take place (Wilson and Scalise, 2006). According to Houghton (2011) the alignment between instruction and assessment involves students developing trust in their teachers, it is about honesty and fairness. This implies that if lecturers assess what they have not taught, assessment can be deemed unfair by students. Consequently, students tend to lose trust in the lecturer as well as their abilities when they cannot answer assessment questions due to unfamiliar content appearing in the assessment stage.

Biggs (2003) posits that a good teaching environment is created when assessments and teaching are aligned. In addition, the Eberly Center (2013, p. 1) argues “if assessments are misaligned with learning objectives and instructional strategies it can undermine student motivation. As a result students become frustrated.” Sharma (2014) shares a similar view by stating that if

assessment is not aligned with the content which is taught, it implies that students would not have been adequately prepared for that particular assessment task. If an assessor does not assess previously learnt content, they are denying their students a chance to display what they have learnt. This principle should be applied to assessment activities so that assessments could be fair to students.

PRINCIPLE THREE: MANAGEMENT BY TEACHERS

The third principle of the BEAR assessment is management by teachers. According to Wilson & Scalise (2006, p. 646) this principle allows for '*feedback and feed forward*' from teacher to student. This infers that teachers have to analyse and justify marks that are obtained by the students, and this helps to highlight the areas of improvement for students. Draney (2009, p.1) asserts that "teachers are the managers and users of assessment data." Assessment data provides feedback to both lecturers and students and prepares students for future assessments (feed forward). According to Black et al (2003) and Taras (2007) assessment feedback can be beneficial to both students and lecturers because lecturers can use it to improve their teaching. Assessment and feedback is an important part of a student's experience at a university (Adams and McNab, 2012 and Hounsell, 2003). This implies that lecturers have a responsibility of marking students' assessments timeously and they have to return them back to students with feedback as this assists them to improve their performance.

Assessment data is able to reveal how much students have achieved in relation to what they were expected to achieve, and it closes the gap between the desired mark and what students have achieved (Nicol, 2007). This idea is based on teachers managing assessment data, meaning that they make comments on students work to show them where they have gone wrong and what steps to follow if they want to achieve more marks in future assessments. According to Retna and Cavana (n.d, p. 1) "feedback to students is an important feature of assessment in higher education. It can be a powerful mechanism for enhancing student learning and motivation." The management of assessment data is therefore an imperative as it allows students an opportunity to improve.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: HIGH-QUALITY EVIDENCE INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

The fourth principle of the BEAR assessment system is high-quality evidence instruction and assessment. According to Wilson and Scalise (2006, p. 653) high quality evidence involves technical issues of assessment, which include being consistent, reliable, unbiased and fair, and that there should also be evidence to support that assessment as being valid. Wilson and Cartensen (2007, p. 323) state that in order for assessment results to be compared across time and context, students should be assessed in different ways and their progress should be monitored. This means that a teacher has to have a mark list where each and every student's marks are recorded. This would assist in gathering evidence that shows that indeed assessment did take place and students' results are analysed in order to monitor their progress.

Consequently, there is variety of ways that a teacher can use to monitor students' progress. The development of wright maps is one of them. "Wright maps represent the principle of high-quality evidence (Wilson and Carstensen, 2007, p. 323). According to Abetkoff (2015, p. 1) progress maps provide an analysis of what students know, the skills that they have and areas of improvement, and they can be used to monitor one student or a group of students as they allow teachers to interpret students' performances. This principle is linked to the second principle of assessment because it is concerned with evidence which supports that there is a link between instruction and assessment. As a result, assessments and assessment data should reveal that teachers are assessing what they have taught.

Moreover, teachers are able to tell where students are facing difficulties by studying the wright maps they have created. Feedback and feed forward can then be provided to students, which imply that the third principle is followed where teachers manage and use assessment data. In so doing, the first principle is also addressed because assessment is now serving a developmental role to the student by encouraging and promoting more and deeper learning. The four principles of the BEAR assessment system are interrelated in order to make assessments fair and valid.

2.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an understanding of the phenomenon of assessment in higher education, the purposes of assessment, the history of assessment as well as the current trends of assessment in higher education and assessment challenges. It has also explored the involvement of students in assessments as well as the experiences of students of their assessments. The BEAR assessment system serves as a theory which provides insight into for the study because it views lecturers and students as key role players in assessment activities.

The following chapter discusses the methodology used in the study, data collection tools and research design are captured in the chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explored the literature and a theoretical lens on assessment. Student involvement and key concepts that have assisted in understanding undergraduate students' experiences of assessment have also been discussed. This chapter discusses the qualitative approach, the research design, the phenomenological case study, context of the study as well as the interpretive paradigm. The methodological concerns relevant in the study are also discussed together with the sampling process. The chapter further expands on the methods of data collection that were used. The use of thematic analysis for the study is then discussed. Lastly, this chapter explains how the data was analysed, and the ways of ensuring trustworthiness, ethical considerations and the limitations for the study. Finally, the researcher concludes with a summary of the chapter.

3.2 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Creswell (1994) has provided a simplified definition of qualitative research, the author states that qualitative research is a coherent and personal process that is used to describe life experiences and how people make meaning of their experiences. This study employed a qualitative research design. Shuttleworth (2008, p. 1) argues that "qualitative research is a research method used extensively by scientists and researchers studying human behaviour and habits." Authors such as, Soy (2006, p. 1) affirm this view by stating that "social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods". This reveals that researchers from the field of Social Sciences are making use of the qualitative research approach.

The views mentioned above by (Shuttleworth, 2008; Soy, 2006 and Creswell, 1994) allude that qualitative research explores real life issues which exist in the real world. In this study, qualitative research was used to explore undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their formative assessments. The qualitative research paradigm was best suited for this study because it examined human behaviour and habits. Assessment (the phenomenon in the study) is indeed part of the real life of students in a higher education institution. The study has explored how students have experienced assessment in two Geography modules.

Thus, the study is limited to undergraduate Geography students that were purposively selected from the Social Sciences cluster (Module A and Module B) in one of the universities that provides professional teacher training. Students were selected because they have completed either one of the Geography modules. Indeed, generating qualitative data is better suited for addressing personal opinion and judgment (Shuttleworth, 2008). The Geography students were in a better position to share their experiences of their assessments, a quantitative approach to the research was not chosen for the study because it was not suitable for the aim of this study. Geography students had to express their experiences of Geography assessments from their point of view and state why they had such experiences.

Furthermore, the qualitative research design was adopted by this study because it seeks to provide a reflective description. Qualitative research is useful to find out how people think or feel (McLeod, 2008). Qualitative research was useful in this study because it has explored the students' experiences with regard to their assessments, as the students' have expressed what they think and feel and they have qualified why they have these experiences.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research project must have a research design. According to Trochim (2006, p. 1) "a research design provides the glue that holds the research project together. A design is used to structure the research, to show all the major parts of the research project – the samples or groups, measures

treatments or programs, and methods of assignment – work together to try to address the central research questions.”

The above definition suggests that a research design sheds light as to what the research project entails. According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010, p. 20) “a research design describes the procedures for conducting the study, including when, from whom and under what conditions the data will be obtained. This is similar to the view that was shared by Trochim (2006) above, these authors assert that the research design organizes a research project and acts as a framework for the research. The role of the research design is to ensure that the researcher keeps referring to his/her research questions and not diverge from them. This study has employed the qualitative research design within an interpretive paradigm. The students’ experiences are explored using the case study approach and purposive sampling has been used. The reasons for using this design are stated below.

3.3.1 PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

In order to understand what the phenomenological case study entails, one has to understand the meaning of the concept ‘phenomenology’ and the concept ‘case study’. Van Manen (1990, p. 3) defines phenomenology as “a person’s perception of the meaning of the event and the focus of phenomenologic enquiry is what people experience in regard to some phenomena”. From this definition it can be gathered that phenomenology has a lot to do with a person’s opinion of a particular situation that they have gone through.

The following section describes what a case study is. According to Shuttleworth (2015, p. 1) a case study is an in depth study of a particular situation, it is a method used to narrow down a broad field of research into one easily researchable topic”. Creswell (2009) asserts this view by stating that a case study is useful when examining an existing phenomenon that exists in a real life situation. In this study the case study was selected with the hope that it would provide an in-depth exploration of the undergraduate students’ experiences of assessment and the reasons why the undergraduate students have such assessment experiences. Students experiences of assessment are a real life situation as assessments determine whether students’ progress or not.

Hence, Waters (2015) outlines that a phenomenological research describes a person's lived experience. The phenomenological inquiry was appropriate for this study because it aimed at exploring what were the Geography students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for having such experiences of assessment, this was from the perspective of research participants. The research style that was employed by this study is the phenomenological case study because a phenomenological case study is associated with any qualitative research project that aims to provide a detailed reflective description of everyday life and practice (Hoey, 2011). This research style is suited for this study because it explored the everyday teaching and learning life of students, that involving assessment.

Indeed, phenomenological analysis is mainly concerned with understanding how the everyday activities are carried out from the participants' perspective (Schwandt, 2000). Phenomenological inquiry was better suited for this study because it allowed the researcher to understand the everyday activities of assessments, that the 2ND and 3rd year students have completed for their Geography modules. Geography students' were given a chance to voice their experiences of assessment tasks given, from their perspective. These participants were also given a chance to qualify their experiences, by stating reasons for having such experiences.

Interestingly, Husserl (1970, p. 65) reveals that "we can only know what we experience". Establishing Geography students' experiences of their assessment was therefore imperative because they have lived through the experiences of their assessments and they were able to reflect about what they have experienced. This research study looked at the individual's point of view because Giorgi (1985) points out that that the major characteristic of phenomenological case study is useful when looking into the individuals' point of view. Thus, looking at an individual's point of view required the researcher to be in contact with the participants, this was done through interviews (semi-structured interviews) to be precise.

Patton (1990) asserts that the purpose of interviewing is to learn what is in someone's mind, the author further states that phenomenological study focuses on lived experiences. The study was able to establish what was in the Geography students' minds with regard to the assessment tasks they had completed for the two Geography modules and the reasons for them having such

experiences. The Geography students' were able to share their experiences of assessment because it is their experiences of assessment, in other words they have completed the assessment tasks for the Geography modules.

Furthermore, the phenomenological inquiry is better suited for this study because it falls within the realm of qualitative research (Rodgers, 2013). Creswell (1994, p. 5) reveals that "qualitative research becomes absorbed in the phenomena studied and bears the attitude of appreciation rather than expect." This implies that when the researcher goes out to the field he/she does not claim to be an expert about what the participants have gone through but the aim should be to understand what the participants have gone through from their own perspective, which is what I aimed to achieve.

Here are further reasons to explain why the case study was better suited for this study. According to Cherry (2014, p. 3) "a case study is a form of qualitative descriptive research that is used to look at individuals, a small group of participants or a group as whole." Using the case study method was appropriate for this study because firstly, it is qualitative. Secondly, its intent was to explore Geography students' experiences of assessments and the reasons for having such experiences. The Geography students would be an example of a small group of participants since the study focused on two modules.

Hence, George & Bennet (2005, p. 18) "the use of case studies to build and test theories in political science and the other social sciences has increased in recent years. Many scholars have argued that the social sciences rely too heavily on quantitative research and formal models and have attempted to develop and refine rigorous methods for using case studies". Once more, this highlights that the case study method is better suited for this study because it is undertaken in the Social Science cluster and it is aligned with the recent trend where there has been an increase in the number of social scientists that make use of the case study method.

One of the advantages of using a case study is that they are able to generate more realistic responses and they are useful when trying to determine why certain situations exist (Shuttleworth, 2015). Hence, Shuttleworth (2015) further states that case studies are flexible in a

sense that when a researcher uses this method, he/she can introduce new and unexpected results which may lead a research taking a new direction. The case study is more suitable for this study because the second research intended exploring why undergraduate Geography student had such experiences of assessment, the case study was able to provide the reasons as to why undergraduate Geography students had such experiences of assessment.

This study aimed at understanding how Geography student teachers have experienced assessments that took place in the Geography Education modules. However, Zainal (2007) argues that the case study method remain a common approach to data gathering, since it is widely accepted in many social science research studies especially when detailed explanations of social behaviour are required from the participants. This study was conducted in a social science discipline, namely Geography Education and it has assisted in exploring the experiences that the students have with regard to their Geography assessments but it does not intend to generalise from the findings.

3.4 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in one of the higher education institutions located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This university provides professional teacher training at undergraduate level over a minimum of four years. This study forms part of a cluster-based assessment project undertaken by the Social Sciences Cluster. Geography as a module for prospective teachers is amongst the modules that are offered in this institution. There are nine Geography modules that are offered in the four year Bachelor of Education degree, six of them are content modules and the remaining three focuses on methods of teaching Geography. Content modules deal with the geographic themes of the curriculum that are covered in schools, for example climatology and geomorphology and the methods are mainly concerned with pedagogy: that is how to teach Geography since the students are prospective Geography teachers.

The research study explored second and third year university Geography Education students' experiences of their formative assessments and the reasons for them having such experiences. The study was undertaken in two undergraduate modules: a second and a third year module. The

following were the ultimate goals for the study: firstly, exploring undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments and secondly, the reasons for them having these assessment experiences.

The research study is based on data derived from two modules, namely Environmental Risks and Hazards (Natural Hazards) and Climatology. The duration for both the modules is 12 weeks in the first semester. There were 104 registered students for the module, namely Environmental Risks and Hazards (Natural Hazards) and 47 registered students for the Climatology module at the time of data generation. The 104 students are a large class in comparison to other Geography content-based modules because according to Manik (2012), the average class size in 2011 was 47 students. In 2013, the average class size had more than doubled and this implies that in 2012 they were many students that took Geography as a subject.

The Environmental Risks and Hazards (Natural Hazards) module comprised of three assessments: two tests (one with short questions and one with essay type questions) and a poster. The Climatology module comprised of two assessments, one test and one assignment. Both these assessments comprised of essay type questions. There were class lectures (a double period of 1.5 hours) twice a week for each module. The assessment methods varied as discussed above: tests comprising short and long questions, an assignment as well as a poster in order to accommodate different students' abilities. At the end of the semester both modules offer a written examination and a student has to achieve at least 40% in his/her duly performance in order to qualify to write the examination in each subject.

3.5 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

A paradigm is a framework that contains recognised views about a subject, it acts as a guide of what direction the research study should take and how it should be carried out (Shuttleworth, 2014). Examples of paradigms include the positivist, interpretive and critical paradigm. It is also imperative to note that paradigms have different origins in different disciplines, Cohen & Crabtree (2006, p. 36) reveals that "the interpretive paradigm developed as a critique of positivism in the social sciences. The interpretive paradigm is related to hermeneutics, a theory

that emerged in the 19th century associated with social sciences”. This paradigm relates well with the study because it is located within the social sciences discipline.

Hence, Neuman (2006, p. 66) states the “social sciences deal with a particular phase or aspect of human society. They involve the study of people, their beliefs, behavior, interaction and institutions.” The interpretive paradigm has been used as this study because it seeks actual reality in a specific situation. The actual reality for this study involves students and their assessments at an institution of higher learning. Hence, students were asked to share their experiences of assessments.

This study employs the interpretive paradigm which coheres with a qualitative study. Denzin and Lincoln (1994b) reveal that the interpretive research paradigm is essentially qualitative. This view of the interpretive research paradigm suggests that the interpretive paradigm works well with the qualitative approach to research. There are enormous benefits of the interpretive paradigm when doing research.

Different authors have documented the benefits of using the interpretive paradigm when doing research. Leedy and Ormond (2010) infer that the interpretive paradigm qualifies the researcher to gain new knowledge about a particular situation, that is to provide understanding and it also helps to create new concepts and problems that exist in that particular situation. Thus, this study explored undergraduate Geography students’ experiences of their assessments and the reasons for having such experiences. The study was able to acquire new knowledge which was gained about the participants’ experiences of assessments.

Edirisingha (2012) points out that the goal of interpretive research is to understand and interpret human behaviour rather than to speculate on issues such as cause and effect. This implies that a researcher working within the interpretive design has to understand human behaviour according to the participants’ point of view instead of speculating what might be the case of such.

Creswell (2009) asserts that the interpretative paradigm leads to understanding how individuals create meaning in everyday settings and explain their experiences to the world. Creswell (2009) has pointed out that when one engages in interpretive research, one is able to understand the lived experiences from the point of view of those who have experienced it, and this leads to understanding human actions from the point of view of the 'actor'. The students' experiences that were explored in this study have assisted the researcher to understand how undergraduate Geography students are assessed and gauge their experiences of the assessments. Therefore using this paradigm has led the researcher to understand how students construct meaning of their assessments. Participants were also required to express reasons for them having such experiences.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003) research within the interpretive paradigm, is aimed at understanding human behaviour and empathising with it. Thus, this study explores the Geography students' experiences of assessments from their perspective. After the participants shared their experiences they were required to voice why they have these experiences. Hence, the aim was to understand how students experienced their assessments. As a result, Alvermann & Mallozzi (2010) states that research framed in the interpretive paradigm can be used to justify how and why something is happening, and it can also address what is happening from a particular viewpoint.

Furthermore, Alvermann & Mallozzi (2010) further states that researchers using the interpretive paradigm aim to uncover meaning towards a better understanding of the issues involved. This study's aim was to shed light as to how Geography students' have experienced their assessments, as a result it has illuminated some of the issues that are essential in Geography education from a students' perspective.

3.6 METHODOLOGY

The Business Thesaurus (2013, p. 1) defines methodology as "the process used to collect data, the methodology may include interviews, surveys and other research techniques." Similarly,

Rajasekar, Philominathan & Chinnathambi (2013, p. 5) state that a “research methodology is a systematic way to solve a problem. It is a science of studying how research is to be carried out. Essentially, the procedures by which researchers go about their work of describing, explaining and predicting phenomena are called research methodology. It is also defined as the study of methods by which knowledge is gained. Its aim is to give the work plan of research”. These views suggest that the methodology maps out the whole study, providing direction as to how data was generated and whether they address the purpose of the study. Research questions are able to influence a choice of methodology used to conduct a study. In this study, research methodology refers to how the research study was conducted and its coherent sequence.

3.6.1 SAMPLING

The Education Centre (2006, p. 1) states that “a sample is a group of people, objects, or items that are taken from a larger population for measurement. The sample should be representative of the population to ensure that we can generalise the findings from the research sample to the population as a whole.” Purposive sampling has been adopted for this study because Patton (1990) states that purposive sampling is popular in qualitative research. A purposive sample is selected based on the knowledge of a population and the purpose of study, and the participants were selected because of certain characteristics, namely having completed the Geography Modules under study (Crossman, 2013; Strydom and Delport, 2005).

Hence, this study’s intent was exploring Geography students’ experiences of their assessments therefore it was only Geography student teachers that were sampled. These students were required to share knowledge about their Geography assessments, this made them different from the rest of the student teachers in this institution because they have completed one of the two Geography modules. Thus, these students were purposively selected because they meet this characteristic. Students’ interviews were on voluntary basis, when the Geography students were filling out questionnaires they had to indicate whether they wanted to be interviewed or not. Hence, there were only six students that volunteered to be interviewed. This is why only six

students were interviewed. There were three students that volunteered to be interviewed from both Geography Module A and Geography Module B.

According to Trochim (2006, p. 7) “in purposive sampling, we sample with a purpose in mind, we usually would have one or more specific predefined groups we are seeking and purposive sampling can be very useful for situations where you need to reach a targeted sample quickly and where purposive sampling is used one is likely to get opinions of the targeted population.” This study targeted two groups of Geography student teachers, the 1st group is in their 2nd year of study and the 2nd group is in their 3rd year of study. These Geography students were required to share their own experiences of their Geography assessments and the reasons for them having these experiences. Sampling was therefore done with a purpose in mind and this assisted in answering the research questions for the study.

According to Olivier (2006) purposive sampling is a form of sampling where the researcher chooses the research participants that would form part of the study. The researcher makes this decision on the basis of specialist knowledge and also a willingness to participate. The researcher from this study also made a decision on the basis of specialist knowledge of the participants because she needed to interview Geography students that had completed one of Geography modules. The researcher did not look for student teachers in general, her area of focus was Geography students that had completed Module A or Module B. The researcher then gave the research participants a choice to decide whether they liked to be part of the study or not, the researcher also informed them that they were free to pull out of the study at any time without providing reasons for doing so.

Interestingly, Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) argues that the purposive method is mostly suitable for small scale research and that they are less complicated to set up and do not cost very much. This research study is a small scale study, studying the students’ experiences with regard to their assessments so purposive sampling was effective. Also, the researcher was a full time student and had a meager budget for this study. Last but not least, another reason for choosing purposive sampling was because a phenomenological case study allows the use of purposive sampling. Parthasarathy (2008) suggests that in a case study, the collection of data develops

through conversations so the researcher identifies key informants, the key informants have therefore been identified through purposive sampling. 2nd and 3rd year Geography student teachers were identified because they contribute to understanding the phenomenon, because they have completed one of the two Geography modules

3.6.2 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Data was generated in two phases. A pilot study was conducted prior to data collection.

3.6.3 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted first in order to test that relevant data could be obtained from the participants through questionnaires. This allowed the researcher to rework the questions in order to ensure that the participants understand what is required from the questionnaires. The aim of the pilot study was to address weaknesses, misconceptions and problems in questionnaires so that they could be rectified before data collection took place.

Hence, ten questionnaires were distributed to both Geography Module A and Geography Module B students prior to data collection. The students were asked to carefully read the questions and provide responses in the presence of the researcher. This was done in order for the researcher to take notes and clarify issues that might have been raised by the students that participated in the pilot study. Fortunately, it was discovered that the participants were able to provide responses to the questionnaires with ease. This meant that the questionnaires became a tried and trusted tool that could be used to collect data. The researcher then emailed the questionnaires to all the students that had completed either Geography Module A or Geography Module B.

After the pilot study had been conducted, questionnaires were emailed to students. The students that were interested in taking part in the study filled out the questionnaires and emailed them back to the researcher. From there onwards, some participants that had completed the questionnaires agreed to partake in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews on the other hand, did not require a pilot study because the researcher was present during the interviews

and could clarify the questions. As a result, participants were able to seek clarity if they were not sure of the questions. Consequently, this study ended up with two methods of data collection. A discussion of both this methods is documented in the following section.

3.6.4 QUESTIONNAIRES

According to the Evaluation Research Team (2008, p. 1) “a questionnaire is a set of questions for gathering information from individuals. You can administer questionnaires by mail, telephone, using face-to-face interviews, as handouts, or electronically (i.e., by e-mail or through Web-based questionnaires).” In this study the questionnaires were filled in by the participants. Questionnaires were used as one of the methods of data collection because I worked with a group of students, Geography students to be precise. It would have been time consuming for the researcher to orally interview all thirty research participants.

Thus, questionnaires ensured that the researcher collected data over a short period of time. According to Kenyatta (2015, p. 41) “questionnaires are a useful method to investigate: Patterns, frequency, ease and success of user needs, expectations, perspectives, priorities and preferences.” The use of questionnaires was therefore appropriate for this study because it studied Geography students’ experiences of their assessments, the study also revealed why students prefer certain assessment methods over others. There were 107 questionnaires that were e-mailed to Geography Module A students. This was because there were 107 students that completed Geography module A. Out of the 107 questionnaires e-mailed to Geography Module A students, 15 questionnaires were returned back to the researcher. The response rate was therefore 14% from Geography Module A.

There were 47 questionnaires that were e-mailed to the Geography Module B students, this was because there were 47 students that completed the Geography 410 module. Out of the 47 questionnaires e-mailed to Geography Module B, 8 questionnaires were returned to the researcher. The response rate was therefore 17% from Geography Module B. Questionnaires were e-mailed a month before the interview schedule, this was because the researcher wanted the participants to have plenty of time to gather their memories of the Geography modules before

filling out the questionnaires, in order to ensure that accurate data was collected. Questionnaires were used to answer critical question number one, that is, the experiences of the undergraduate Geography students of their assessments.

There are different forms of questionnaires. Milne (1999) points out that questionnaires come in many different forms, there are accurate to opinion based questionnaires. Milne (1999) further states that there is also a variety of options available, for example tick boxes or free text responses. For the purpose of this study, the researcher made use of an opinion based questionnaire that consisted of both tick boxes and free texts responses. This was because the study explored undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments. The questionnaire consisted of both closed questions and open ended questions. Close questions was where participants were required to tick a box that applied to their response. The open ended questions provided participants with the freedom to express themselves, and free text responses were required for these types of questions.

According to Cardiff (2006, p. 9) "the main advantages of questionnaires are that they are easy to analyse, cost effective, information is collected in a standardized way and respondents are given time to think about the responses since they are not required to answer immediately." This was also evident in the research study conducted because I have been to the field twice for data collection through questionnaires. This would not have been the case if I was using oral interviews only because they are time consuming. I also found that the data from questionnaires was easy to analyse because I studied the relationship between the responses and question and I was able to group the responses into categories which I could later pursue in interviews. However, there are some challenges with regard to using questionnaires.

Milne (1999) states that one of the disadvantages of using questionnaires is recalling information, this because questionnaires occur after events so the respondents might have forgotten what took place during the event, which is why I gave the participants ample time to fill in their questionnaires, I didn't rush them. Milne (1999) further notes that questionnaires with open ended questions generate large amounts of data that may be difficult to analyse and take a lot of time. It is for this reason, I had chosen to have limited open ended questions in the

questionnaire. Where responses to open ended questions were elaborated on, I did request participants to volunteer to participate in the semi structured interviews so that they could expand in detail. Participants were given a month to go over the questions, I believe that this gave them more than ample time to gather their memories and thoughts since they had already completed one of the two modules.

The University of Portsmouth (2012) states that another disadvantage of using questionnaires is that respondents may misinterpret questions and this may lead to misunderstandings. It is for this reason, the researcher piloted questionnaires beforehand in order to establish whether the questionnaire was serving the purpose of generating the amount of data needed by the study. With regard to respondents forgetting what had taken place, this was highly unlikely because they completed the Geography modules just a few months ago before the data collection process, so the assessments were still fresh in their minds. With regard to misunderstanding questions, it was highly unlikely because the participants were given ample time to study the questionnaire and raise concerns with me, the researcher if there was a need. In this case no concerns were raised, this means that the questions were clearly understood.

I now discuss the second method of data collection that was used in the study, namely semi-structured interviews.

3.6.5 INTERVIEWS

The second method that was used to obtain data is interviews. According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008, p. 292) "the purpose of the research interview is to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, are believed to provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods, such as questionnaires. Interviews are, therefore, most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants" interviews are amongst the familiar strategies for collecting qualitative data (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; King and Horrocks, 2010). According to Valenzuela and Shrivastava (2008) the qualitative

research interview seeks to describe the meaning of lived experiences, and the main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewee says.

The above authors further state that interviews are better suited for research purposes, if the study's intent is getting the story behind participant's experiences and the researcher can pursue in depth information around the topic. Indeed, the study's intent was exploring undergraduate students' experiences of assessments, and interviews were one of the tools used to gather the story behind the participants' experiences. There are three essential kinds of interviews that can be used in a research study: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick, 2008).

Interviews may be useful as follow up to particular respondents to questionnaires, for example to further investigate the responses (McNamara, 1999). This is exactly how it was used in this study. Firstly, Geography students were given questionnaires to fill out, the questionnaires required students to state their experiences of the assessment tasks that they had completed for the Geography modules. Thereafter, students were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview sessions were used to further delve deeper into the students' responses from questionnaires. Also, participants had to state the reasons for them having such assessment experiences, and this question was not overtly stated in the questionnaire.

3.6.6 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

According to Longhurst (2010, p. 103) "a semi structured interview is a verbal interchange where one person, the interviewer attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important". Semi structured interviews were better suited for this study because Geography students had to share their experiences and the reasons for them having these experiences and the researcher probed their responses for greater detail. The majority of questions that were asked during the interview were centered on assessment.

Research critical question number two, was answered using the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are time consuming. As a result, the researcher did not expect all research participants that filled out the questionnaires to take part in the semi-structured interview schedules. During the questionnaire session, I asked the participants to indicate at the back of the questionnaires if they would like to participate in a semi-structured interview. Only six of the participants that filled out questionnaires indicated that they would like to be part of the semi-structured interviews. There were six research participants who were interviewed in the semi-structured interviews sessions. A Samsung Galaxy Gio was used to record the semi-structured interviews.

McLeod (2014) states that semi-structured interviews tend to be more flexible when compared to structured interviews. I agree with this view because in a structured interview the researcher formulates a number of questions to be discussed in the interview and engaged with only those questions during the Interview. Semi-structured interviews on the other hand, were better suited for this study because they allowed for probing by the researcher when the interviewee raised important issues and concerns with regard to the experiences of Geography assessments.

Thus, during the semi-structured interviews the researcher was able to explore what was said by the interviewee further, without being restricted by the list of questions that were prepared beforehand. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) reveal that the semi-structured interview allows the interviewee the freedom to express his/her views and feelings. This type of data generation method was better suited for this study because it required the participants to express their experiences and feelings about their assessments. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) further state that semi-structured interviews are able to provide trustworthy qualitative data. This study is indeed a qualitative study therefore semi-structured interviews were appropriate. Data was generated from six semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews have shortfalls as well. According to Hove and Anda (2005) semi-structured interviews can be costly and that the quality of the data collected depends on the way that the interview is carried out. Semi-structured interviews can indeed be costly if a researcher has to conduct research outside their home environment, meaning that they would have to travel

to the field being researched in order to collect data that is needed for the research study. This study took the researcher outside her home environment because she had to interview the participants in an environment that they are familiar with and this was costly because she had to travel back and forth to the university for the interviews.

Similarly, Olson and Muise (2009) state that semi-structured interviews can be time consuming and that the place where the interview is conducted can have an impact on the mood or attitude towards the interview. The interviews were carried out at the university, in an environment that the participants are familiar with. The participants were available at different times due to their varying lecture timetables that they have. The researcher had to arrange different times to suit each participant. All the interviews were done on Thursdays during the forum period in an unused venue because this is when the research participants were free.

Indeed, semi-structured were time consuming. The semi-structured interviews also required a lot of quick thinking and preparation of possible various responses because they were done individually. Unlike questionnaires where I had previously emailed the questionnaires then arranged one meeting with the group of the participants and collected the filled out questionnaires. As a result, the response was much quicker for the questionnaires than for the semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews is therefore appropriate for this study because its intent was exploring the experiences of Geography students' of their assessments. The use of semi-structured interviews thus allowed the researcher to understand fully Geography students' experiences and the reasons for them having these experiences. The following table presents the research imperatives and strategies used in the study:

Figure 2 Research Imperatives and Strategies used in the study

CRITICAL QUESTIONS	REASON FOR DATA BEING COLLECTED	RESEARCH STRATEGY	DATA SOURCE	NO. OF SOURCES	SITE OF DATA SOURCE
WHAT ARE THE GEOGRAPHY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THEIR ASSESSMENTS	To access Geography students' experiences of their assessments for either the Geography Module A or geography Module B.	Pilot study Student-teacher questionnaire	Student teachers that have completed either Geography Module A or Geography Module B.	15 (from Geography Module A) 8 (from Geography Module B)	HEI, Kwa-Zulu Natal South Africa
WHY DO THEY HAVE SUCH EXPERIENCES	To understand the reasons why they have the experiences that they have listed or described in critical question number one	Semi-structured interviews/dialogue	Student teachers that have completed either Geography Module A or Geography Module B.	3 (from Geography Module A) 3 (from Geography Module B)	HEI, Kwa-Zulu Natal South Africa

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Leek (2013, p. 1) “data analysis is the practice of finding the right data to answer research questions; it’s about discovering the important arrays in the data.” This is a qualitative study and one has to look at what qualitative data analysis entails.

According to Gibbs, Lewins & Taylor (2010, p. 1). “Qualitative data analysis is the range of processes and procedures whereby we move from the qualitative data we have collected into some form of an explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating. Qualitative data analysis is usually based on an interpretive philosophy. The idea is to examine the meaningful and symbolic content of qualitative data. For example, by analysing the interview data the researcher may be attempting to identify any or all of:

- Someone’s interpretation of the world,
- Why they have that point of view,
- How they can to that view,
- What have they been doing,
- How they convey their view of their situation,
- How they identify or classify themselves and others in what they say,

The process of Qualitative data analysis usually involves two things, writing and the identification of themes”.

Thus, data analysis was conducted in conjunction with the research objectives using questions from the questionnaire as well as the interview schedule to create thematic meaning. The main method of data analysis was thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) state that thematic analysis involves “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic.” Thematic analysis is better suited for this study because the researcher wanted to identify and describe patterns using themes from the participants’ perspective and then try to understand and explain these themes because the study’s focus was exploring Geography students’ experiences of their assessments.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from questionnaires (open ended questions) as well as data from the semi-structured interviews. Howitt and Cramer (2010) assert that thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative analysis. The authors further state that thematic analysis requires the researcher to identify a limited number of themes and that they carry out data collection themselves. In this study data, after the generation of data, transcribing (of the interviews) and coding and analysing then took place.

Data was transcribed a short while after it had been collected rather than at the end of the data generation process. This was done so that the researcher would remember every detail of the interview while it was fresh. It also assisted in ensuring that when data was transcribed, salient information was not omitted. There are also copies of the recordings of the semi-structured interviews that have assisted in refreshing the researcher's memory. Data was grouped into themes, and this is where the thematic analysis took place.

3.8 LIMITATIONS FOR THE STUDY

In this section I discuss the key limitations that I came across while doing the study. Firstly, this study was conducted in one University for two specific modules therefore the findings cannot be generalized.

Secondly, the study is undertaken in modules in a particular year with the students who have registered in that year and the findings can't be used to make assertions about students' assessments in previous years and for the future in those modules other than providing some insights into students' experiences within that particular context and time frame.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance was already obtained by the Social Sciences cluster project from the University for assessment studies where the study was conducted, and the researcher also applied for her own ethical clearance. Geography Module A and Geography Module B participants were informed about what the study entailed and were given a consent form to read and sign. The

form stated that, participation in the study was strictly voluntary, no remuneration or monetary gain was awarded for participating in the study. Participants were also informed that if they so desire, they were free to withdraw whenever the need arises without providing their reasons for doing so. The participants were informed that the information obtained from the study would be treated in the strictest confidence.

Anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed because the questionnaires did not require participants to supply their names. Also, during the interviews the participants were not asked to state their names. Babbie (2014) states that anonymity means that it should not be possible for any of the participants to be identified by any one reading of the study. This study ensured the anonymity of participant's identities was protected by the use of pseudonyms.

3.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Fenton and Mazulewicz (2008, p. 7) "the aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the enquiry's findings are worth paying attention to and that the three issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, transferability and confirmability". To address credibility the researcher used two methods of data collection, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This was done to generate two layers of data, what was said on the questionnaires was explored further on the semi-structured interviews in addition to other data, for example, during the semi-structured interviews the participants were required to recall the assessments that they were given for the Geography Education modules, and this is the same as one of the questions that participants responded to on the questionnaire.

Transferability was not ensured because the researcher does not intend to generalise the findings of the study. The findings apply specifically to the participants that the research was conducted on, they cannot be transferred or applied beyond the boundaries of this research project. Confirmability was ensured by taking back the summary of the findings for the semi-structured interviews after transcribing to ensure that I captured what the participants said during the interview sessions correctly. Research participants were given a chance to confirm or reject the data that was collected.

3.11 CONCLUSION

The research design and methodology were discussed in this chapter. From the discussion above, it was clearly shown why the study uses a qualitative approach and how it fits in within the interpretivist paradigm. Two methods of data generation were used: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were used to expand or develop deeper in what was said in the questionnaires, in addition to generating new data. The researcher explained that purposive sampling was used and the reasons for doing so. In explaining the research procedure, the researcher discussed the data generation procedure and analysis. The research consent, ethical considerations, limitations for the study as well as the ways of ensuring trustworthiness was discussed. The next chapter explores data that has been generated and it presents the findings of the study according to the themes that emerged.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter focused on research design and methodology which underpins this study. This chapter presents data generated from questionnaires as well as semi structured interviews. The analysis of data is then facilitated with interrogating the research questions. The findings from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews are then discussed by the use of thematic analysis. Thereafter, follows a summary of the chapter.

The foremost purpose of this research study was to explore undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments as well as the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the tools used to answer the following research critical questions:

- What are undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments?
- Why do the undergraduate Geography students have such experiences of assessment?

4.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the data for this study. Boyatzis (1998) reveals that thematic analysis is the easiest strategy of categorising qualitative data as the researcher evaluates the data, makes notes and sorts it into different categories. The study is qualitative in nature and thematic analysis appeared to be a useful way to analyse the data. According to Komori (2005) thematic analysis is useful when a researcher wants to gain knowledge and insights from the data collected. The result is that researchers are able to determine broad patterns and themes that emerge when this style of analysis is utilised.

Students experiences' of their assessments have been analyzed using the framework of the assessment tasks that they completed for the Geography modules. In this chapter students shared

their cumulative experiences about assessment tasks for each module as well as specific experiences of each assessment task per module which they completed. I have introduced a category which caters for the collective experiences of assessment in Geography, as well as a category which caters for students' specific experiences of each of the assessments. In summary, data analysis is as follows:

- Students' cumulative experiences of assessments
- Students' specific experiences of each of the assessments

4.3 CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCES OF ASSESSMENTS (MODULE A)

This section presents some of the key findings that emerged in the study cumulatively. It discusses overall, the students' experiences of their assessments in module A. The participants responded about module assessments in general. The students' responses about their assessments related to issues of fairness, appropriateness, interest and levels of challenge.

The responses for Geography Module A reveal that students were generally happy with their assessments. The data generated from the questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews revealed that in Geography Module A, students were assessed in three different ways. There were three separate assessment methods, the first assessment method which was used to assess students, was a poster. Thereafter, there were two tests that were written by students. The first test comprised of essay type of questions and the second test comprised of short questions.

Students shared that their assessments were based on the journal articles that they had studied in class and that the time allocated to them for assessment preparation was adequate. The cumulative experiences of assessment have been documented in the next section (4.3.1 – 4.3.5). A detailed discussion for each specific assessment in the Geography modules follows in section (4.4).

4.3.1 SUBTHEMES THAT EMERGED FROM QUESTIONNAIRES AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The subthemes that emerged from the analysis of data, which contributed to answering the research questions are as follows:

- 4.3.1.1 The fairness of assessments
- 4.3.1.2 The appropriateness of assessments
- 4.3.1.3 Students' interest in the assessments
- 4.3.1.4 The level/s of challenge of assessments

4.3.2 THE FAIRNESS OF THE ASSESSMENTS

Students' responses on fairness included the following concepts: adequate knowledge for the assessment, lecturer's explanation of the assessment, the time allocation and preparation for the assessment and opportunities for a re-test. These themes can be seen in the comments below.

Student 1 (questionnaire) indicated that: *“assessments were well explained and the time allocation assigned for preparation for the assessment tasks was fair.”*

Student 9 (questionnaire) stated that : *“we were given enough time to complete each and every assessment activity and assessment activities accommodated every student.”*

Student 2 (questionnaire) indicated: *“assessment activities required knowledge we got from the articles completed in class.”*

Student 8 (questionnaire) stated: *“The assessments were fair ... to the content and that made them easy to answer and approach.”*

Student 3 (questionnaire) indicated: *“They were fair assessments.... a make-up test was given.”*

The above experiences clearly show that students were generally happy with their overall Geography Module A assessments in terms of fairness. Most of the students stated that they were

given enough time to complete the assessment activities. During the interviews some students also shared that they were prepared for assessments during contact time, for example the content of the test was covered during lectures: contact time. During the course of the interview some students also revealed that after writing the first test, it was discovered that most of the students did not achieve the desired outcomes, and the lecturer then allowed them a re-test (with different questions in the assessment) in order to improve their performance after providing them with feedback from the first test.

In this instance, assessment was used to gauge how much geographic knowledge the students possessed. The test results then revealed that students were not performing as well as the lecturer expected and after reviewing the answers to the test and discussing them, a solution was collectively made, that is to grant a make-up test to students. The re-test allowed students to use their improved knowledge of the content and assessment strategies to better their marks and this improved their overall performance.

4.3.3 THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE ASSESSMENTS

When asked to respond on the appropriateness of their Geography assessments,

Student 13 (questionnaire): revealed that *“the assessments given in the ... module were appropriate and the fact that we did not get an assignment took the burden off our shoulders. I really loved the assessment method that was used.”*

Student 1 (questionnaire): stated that *“assessments were appropriate because everything was explained in class.”*

The above responses suggest that some Geography students enjoy a variety of approaches when it comes to assessment tasks and assessments are said to be appropriate where they assess knowledge learnt. Student 2 views an assignment as a burden on her shoulder because she does not like to be assessed in this way. However, this student enjoys assessment approaches that require skills as well creativity. It thus appears that when students are assessed in a variety of

ways and when assessments assess what they had been taught they deem the assessments to be appropriate.

4.3.4 STUDENTS' RESPONSES ON THE INTEREST OF THEIR ASSESSMENTS

The following students expressed that assessments were interesting.

Student 12 (questionnaire) revealed that the *“assessments were interesting”* and also participant 2 (semi-structured interview) said that *“it was interesting to look for colours and cutting out pictures while preparing for the assessments”*.

For student 2 mentioned above, assessments were interesting because she gained a lot of information whilst undertaking the assessments for the module. The findings suggest that her content knowledge was developed and this also contributed to her professional development as a teacher in the making. This participant further stated that she is now in a better position to assess the subject's content knowledge to her prospective learners using a variety of interesting assessment methods which would appeal to different learners, when she becomes a qualified teacher. As for participant 2 locating pictures and deciding which colours would be used when designing the poster, made Geography assessments interesting.

4.3.5 STUDENTS' RESPONSES ON THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THEIR ASSESSMENTS

Other students felt that the assessments were challenging but good at the same time. The following response revealed that the students were also adequately prepared for challenging assessment tasks.

Student 5 (questionnaire) indicated: *“all assessments were challenging but because it was something we were taught, we were able to complete them properly.”*

The student revealed that although the assessments were challenging, the fact that they had a strong content background it allowed them to tackle the assessment questions with ease. This participant has indicated that the alignment between the assessments and the content that they are taught during the contact sessions (lectures etc.) allows them to cope with challenging assessment questions. Their sufficient geographic content allowed them to tackle challenging assessment questions with ease. The following section presents Geography Module A specific students' experiences of assessment.

4.4 STUDENTS' SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES OF EACH ASSESSMENT METHOD

In the questionnaires, majority of the students wrote that they completed three assessments for Geography Module A (poster, an essay test and a test comprising of short questions). This was also confirmed during the semi-structured interview sessions. Students' experiences of the poster are captured firstly, followed by their experiences of the essay test and lastly their experiences of the short test are revealed.

4.4.1 SUBTHEMES THAT EMERGED FROM QUESTIONNAIRES AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The subthemes that emerged from the analysis of data, contributed to answering the research questions are as follows:

- 4.4.1.1 The fairness of the poster
- 4.4.1.2 The appropriateness of the poster as an assessment
- 4.4.1.3 Interest in the poster as an assessment
- 4.4.1.4 The level of challenge of the poster

4.4.2 STUDENTS' RESPONSES ON THE FAIRNESS OF THE POSTER

The first assessment was a poster. To recap, students had to conduct research on natural hazards and present them in a poster format. The majority of the students in the study appeared to have a

positive experience of this assessment for various reasons, which included being given enough preparation time to conduct research. For example, the following student stated:

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) stated: *“The poster was nice, we had a lot of time to prepare for it.”*

Participant 3 (semi-structure interview) said: *“were given enough time to prepare for the poster.”*

It is crystal clear from the comments above that some students considered this Geography assessment to be fair because they were given enough time to prepare for them.

4.4.3 THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE POSTER AS A FORM OF ASSESSMENT

Generally, most of the students felt that the poster was an appropriate form of assessment because it catered for different students’ abilities and it also prepared them for their future roles as teachers, giving them a glance of how they can best present the essential content of a topic as prospective teachers. This can be observed in the following comments:

Student 14 (questionnaire) indicated: *“... a poster was convenient and accommodated every student’s ability.”*

Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) stated: *“The poster was good taught us how to teach the section in class.”*

Student 4 (questionnaire): stated that *“the poster ... showed us how we could teach the content to our learners...”*

It thus appears from the students’ responses that this assessment method was able to develop the skills of presentation and selecting appropriate content knowledge on a theme for display. According to some of the students, the poster showed them how they could teach the content on floods and other natural hazards when they become teachers. Natural hazards form part of the Geography curriculum in high school (FET Phase), which is where these students are located and are expected to teach once they complete their studies.

4.4.4 THE INTEREST OF THE POSTER AS A FORM OF ASSESSMENT

The following is what relates to student interest when students were given an opportunity to share their experiences about the poster:

Student 15 (questionnaire) indicated: *“The poster was the ... most interesting of all, it allowed me to be creative.”*

Student 6 (questionnaire) stated: *“The poster allowed one to use their creativity to present their knowledge.”*

Participant 2 (semi-structured Interview) indicated: *“It allowed for creativity. It was interesting looking for pictures and colours.”*

This form of assessment was appealing to most students for multiple reasons, and this can be observed from the students' comments above. Some of these reasons supplied by the students include students interest, ease of the assessment (it didn't appear to be an assessment that was complex) and it appealed to their creativity. Some students have noted that the poster catered for their different abilities, meaning that it required them to think out of the box and it was interesting because students had to choose the layout of the poster, select and present relevant information as well as ensure that the graphics: example colours were suitable. According to some students this was the first assessment in their university experience that allowed them to be creative. The poster as a form of assessment was out of the ordinary because Geography students in this discipline are used to writing essays and assignments as assessments.

4.4.5 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THE POSTER

The majority of students felt that the poster assessment was the easiest of all the three assessment tasks that they have completed for Geography Module A. The reason being was that students were familiar with the content that they had to research. This is evident in the following responses:

Student 15 (questionnaire) stated: *“The poster was the easiest and most ... of all.”*

Participant 1 (semi-structured interview) indicated: *“Research about a certain topic is not challenging and I had to be creative. Most of what was on the poster was covered at high school.”*

Students expressed that the content that was required for the completion of the poster was easily accessible because students had to recall what they were taught in high school. In order to refresh their memories they had to engage in further research on the topic which they felt was not challenging. This shows that assessment become less challenging when students are expected to recall and build on previously learnt knowledge.

4.5 STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF THE ESSAY TEST

There were two subthemes that emerged when students were asked to share their experiences of the essay test:

4.5.1 The fairness of the essay test

4.5.2 The level of challenge of the essay test

4.5.1 THE FAIRNESS OF THE ESSAY TEST

The essay test was the second assessment, and most students expressed feelings of confidence due to their fondness for this form of assessment that allows them to present an argument and they felt that this was fair. This can be observed in the following response.

Student 6 (questionnaire) explained: *“an essay type test, I personally felt it was a good style of questioning as you get to argue your facts.”*

It appears that the participant above is very fond of this assessment method, as he felt that the questions allowed him to express himself by granting him an opportunity of making sound arguments.

Some students expressed that the first test was fair because of adequate preparation time and they were provided and guided through the content of the journal articles prior to the test. This is evident in the following responses:

Student 1 (questionnaire) indicated that the: *“time duration to do preparation ... and test were accurate or fair.”*

Participant 2 (semi-structured Interview) stated that it was fair and that: *“learning for the test was easy because we were given notes, reading and summaries to prepare us for the test.”*

Student 2 (questionnaire) indicated that: *“the test we wrote was based on articles that we did in Geography.”*

In contrast, some students expressed their dislike of the essay test when asked to comment about their experiences. This can be seen from the following responses:

Student 4 (questionnaire) indicated that: *“the test was set on readings which was not a good idea, as there was too much information to remember.”*

Student 14 (questionnaire) stated: *“the first test was confusing and so many students failed it.”*

The first student's dislike of this assessment and viewing it as unfair was based on the view that there was too much of information to learn for the assessment and the second was that the student was confused (but the student doesn't explain what exactly confused him in the assessment). The above overall students' responses reveal that students have different preferences when it comes to assessments. Some students felt that essay type questions are a good style of questioning while others have a dislike of essay type questions.

Thus, is clear from students' responses that some students' associate essay type questions with high failure rates as they require a lot of content that has to be recalled. Essay questions tend to be difficult to students because they have to have adequate content knowledge when attempting assessments of this nature. Essay questions require critical in-depth responses and the

development of an argument which may be challenging to some students who lack the requisite content knowledge.

Students expressed that they feel assessments are fair when lecturers grant them adequate preparation time for an assessment and also when they have been given adequate preparation materials, for example journal articles, summaries and notes relating to the topic.

4.5.2 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THE ESSAY TEST

All the participants who were interviewed (n=3) unanimously stated that the essay test was not that challenging, and the reason being was that the students were thoroughly prepared for the test during contact time. This is revealed in the following responses:

Participants 1 (semi-structured interview) stated: *“the first test wasn’t hard/wasn’t easy it was normal. Some of the questions were easy because the content was covered in class.”*

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) indicated that: *“I was able to manage, wasn’t as difficult and passed well. Learning for the test was easy because we were given notes...”*

Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) stated that: *“It was ok, it was good, it wasn’t difficult. It was broad, it wasn’t specific, we could talk about our own experience.”*

This assessment approach was viewed as allowing greater freedom to students in their responses compared to the test with short questions. For example, participant 3 stated *“we just had to recall from the article. It was broad, it wasn’t specific, we could talk about our own experience”*. According to students short questions appear to be specific and limiting in a way because some questions do not allow them to share their experiences. However, the essay questions on the other hand were broad and allowed them to share their experiences. The students’ comments on the essay type assessment reveal that assessments become less challenging when students can relate what they are learning in class with their real life experiences.

The following section presents students' experiences of the test comprising of short questions.

4.6 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE TEST COMPRISING OF SHORT QUESTIONS

The findings from the study reveal that the second test was probably crafted in order to assist students' in terms of improving their marks because most of them performed badly in the first test which was an essay type of assessment. This was revealed by students during the process of data generation.

Student 3 stated that: *"the second test was a make-up test because most students didn't do well in the first test"*. Student 14 also confirmed this view by stating *"The first test was confusing and so many students failed it."*

The above response reveals that the lecturer discussed the assessments and performance with her students. Students were made aware of their overall performance collectively as a class. The lecturer must have undertaken a diagnostic analysis and ascertained that the majority of the students had performed poorly (the lecturer provided feedback on the students' performance to the class), this is why a make-up test comprising of short questions was granted as another assessment to the students.

There were two subthemes that emerged when students were asked to share their experiences of the test comprising of short questions:

4.6.1 The fairness of the test comprising of short questions.

4.6.2 The level of challenge of the test comprising of short questions

The subthemes are expanded in the following section. They relate to the test comprising of short questions.

4.6.1 STUDENTS RESPONSES ON THE FAIRNESS OF THE TEST COMPRISING OF SHORT QUESTIONS

Students felt that this assessment was fair because it utilised an accommodating style of questioning. This is shown in the following responses:

Student 6 (questionnaire) indicated that: *“test 2 catered for all students as it featured the questioning style: short questions”*.

Student 7 (questionnaire) shared that: *“I liked this test because questions required straight forward answers”*.

The above responses reveal that these participants felt that the test was fair because the short questions catered for every student’s ability and the questions required specific answers. From the students comments it can be deduced that some students exhibit positive experiences of fairness when they are assessed in this fashion.

4.6.2 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THE TEST COMPRISING OF SHORT QUESTIONS

The majority of students expressed the view that this test was more challenging because they had to recall a lot of information in order to prepare for it. Participants also compared the two tests that they had completed for the module since the test methods differed in terms of the questioning style that was used. The findings from this study revealed that the majority of students prefer essay type of assessment questions over short questions because the essay type allows the student freedom and choice of information to include as a response while the short questions are limiting, due to their nature of requiring specific content knowledge. This can be observed in the following responses:

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) stated that: *“the second test was a little bit more challenging, more difficult but I managed to pass not as well as the first one. The type of questions made it challenging and we had a lot to learn to prepare for it so it was difficult to remember specific details.”*

Similarly, participant 1 (semi-structured interview) indicated: *“I hated that test, she gave us a lot of reading to do and questions were too specific and into the articles. You cannot read all the articles, memorise facts. They were too many facts to remember.”*

The above students’ responses reveal that when students have to study a lot of information assessments become challenging. Students want to be guided in terms of where they should focus their energies when studying for a test, for example:

Participant 3 (semi-structured Interview) stated: *“No scope was given so it was too much to cover in one test.”*

An alternative view was presented by,

Student 14 (questionnaire) when she stated: *“the third assessment which was the test was not difficult and confusing as the previous test.”*

For both the participants above, it appears that she was happier with the second test because it provided more clarity as to what content she was required to include in answering the questions. Thus, it can be seen that a student can deem a test to be challenging when specific assessment guidelines (a scope) are not provided and there is according to them extensive content to learn. However, if specific assessments guidelines are provided to students, it reduces the content that they have to study.

The following section presents the findings derived from Geography Module B students, data presented is from both interviews and questionnaires.

4.7 CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCES OF GEOGRAPHY MODULE B ASSESSMENTS

Students' collective experiences were grouped into three subthemes for Module B.

4.8 SUBTHEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The subthemes that emerged from the analysis of data, which contributed to answering the research questions related to:

- 4.8.1 The fairness of assessments
- 4.8.2 The appropriateness of assessments
- 4.8.3 The level of challenge of assessments

4.8.1 THE FAIRNESS OF THE ASSESSMENTS

The following responses are based on students' comments on the fairness of their assessment tasks. Half of the students (where n=8) in the questionnaires stated that the assessments were fair and they gave reasons to support why they had these experiences. This is evident in the following responses.

Student 8 (questionnaire) indicated that: *"they were clear assessments, everything was explained in class clearly."*

Student 5 (questionnaire) stated that: *"they were standard, it was everything we had gone through with the lecturer."*

Student 4 (questionnaire) indicated that: *"the topics were clear but the problem arise with the marking."*

Student 3 (questionnaire) said that: *"they were good and relevant."*

In contrast, there was an alternative view expressed by some students which was contrary to the above experiences of some students regarding their assessments. One student felt that the

assessments were unfair because the time allocated for the completion was not adequate. This can be seen in the response below:

Student 6 (questionnaire) indicated that: *“assessments needed a lot of time, I found myself under pressure because of the delays that occurred.”*

The student further stated that the delays were caused by the lecturer being on sick leave. Consequently, students were not given enough time to thoroughly prepare for the assessment tasks. This student stated that they spent a lot of time doing nothing while the lecturer was away on leave and when the lecturer returned there was a rush through the assessments because time was running out for the semester. The university operates with time frames in terms of mark submissions as well as with the release of results. Hence, the results from formative assessments determine whether a student is able to sit and write examinations at the end of the semester or not.

Similar to the above student, the following participant felt that the assessments for this module were unfair.

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) stated that: *“Test and assignments should be fair. The test should be based on the content of the course pack because when you prepare for a test you read the course pack as well as notes. Therefore if you get a question paper with questions you haven’t read, it becomes difficult to answer those questions. But I would like to see a question paper with what was taught in class as well what is in the course pack.”*

The above participant reveals that there was no alignment between what was taught in class, the content of the course pack and the test questions, which is why some students have stated that the assessments were unfair. Students’ comments revealed that they would like to be assessed on the content of the course pack as well as the content that is covered in class during contact time. The reasons why students feel this way is because they experienced difficulties in attempting to answer questions wherein they had no content knowledge.

Participant 3 (semi-structured Interview) also felt that assessments were not fair due to insufficient content in the course pack that they were provided with in order to complete the assessment tasks. This can be observed in the following comment: *“The course pack did not have sufficient information. Everything should be in the course pack because we pay for that thing.”* This comment implies that this student wants to be provided with adequate content in the course pack that will assist when completing the assessment. The student does not see a need to go to libraries as well as internet sources to search for information because he is of the opinion that he pays for the course pack and it should be fully inclusive. Course packs should therefore provide them with sufficient knowledge that is required for an assessment. All the participants who were interviewed (n=3) indicated that Geography Module B assessments were generally not fair.

4.8.2 THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE ASSESSMENTS

Some Geography Module B students indicated that their assessments were relevant and appropriate to them because the content that they were taught was something that they could relate to, that is climatology. Climate change and global warming is frequently in the news, and everybody can relate to it. This was confirmed in what the students wrote in the questionnaires:

Student 7 (questionnaire) indicated: *“the assessments were ... and relevant to climatology.”*

Student 3 (questionnaire) stated: *“they were good, relevant and appropriate for us.”*

Student 5 (questionnaire) indicated: *“...I would say they were relevant because it was content that we could relate to and it has things that we had also experienced from a global perspective.”*

The above findings reveal that since this was a climatology module students felt that assessments were appropriate because they addressed the climatology content, when it comes to issues of weather and climate it is something that they can relate to because everybody experiences the changes and the content was frequently in the news.

However, there was an alternate view with regard to the appropriateness of the assessment in semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires and interviews presented very different experiences of students with regard to the appropriateness of their assessments. The students in the interviews revealed that assessments were not relevant to their level due to the language barrier. This can be seen below:

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) stated that: *“most of the time I felt that some of the questions are not relevant to our level”* because of the use of the language. Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) indicated the problem as: *“English is too difficult to understand.”* For participant 2 and 3, it thus appeared that the complexity of the language used (English as the medium of instruction) in the assessments was being viewed as an obstacle to their achievement which is why they felt that the assessments were not appropriate. The language used in the assessments should take into consideration the level of study of the students, as it is aligned with certain expectations relating to the standard of work that is expected in the module. When the level of study of students is not taken into consideration students feel that assessments are inappropriate and also when students are unable to understand the language in the assessments due to the complexity of language used, then they feel that the assessments are inappropriate.

4.8.3 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THEIR ASSESSMENTS

Some students felt that the assessments were challenging but good at the same time. For example, Student 2 (questionnaire) indicated: *“assessments were good ... for us, but some of them were challenging.”* Similarly, Student 7 (questionnaire) stated: *“the assessments were very good ... though they were challenging.”* Student 7 also reported *“I managed to pass them both using extra readings from the library.”* These comments suggest that although the assessments are challenging, students understand the importance of taking responsibility for their learning which is why they visit facilities such as libraries to obtain additional readings. This implies that if students feel that they want to progress they should go an extra mile of obtaining additional information from different sources. This shows that that some students realise that they are responsible for their own learning and recognise the importance of performing well in their assessments.

Participant 2 (semi-structured Interview) commented on assessors apparently unrealistic expectations of undergraduate students: *“Even with expectations, you find that they have big expectations as if we are postgraduates whereas they know exactly that we are not so somewhere somehow we are still struggling with engaging research and getting information. Even when marking they should be aware that they are marking for undergraduate 3rd year students.”* This student has expressed that at times there was a feeling that the Geography lecturers did not consider the fact that they were teaching undergraduate students. As a result, they had higher expectations for students when it came to assessments. Students have expressed that the standard of the work that was required from them matches the standard of work that would be produced by postgraduate students. Strangely, the student speaks of not just the assessor for Module B, the student speaks in the plural of assessors in Geography (*“they”*).

Thus, this student also felt that the marking of the assessments was also a problem due to the high expectations of the Geography lecturers. Most students expressed that their Geography lecturer was a strict marker. Consequently, some students reported that they felt they were not performing well in assessments due to the high expectations that the lecturers set for them. The students’ experiences suggest that the context of students (whether they are undergraduates/postgraduates) should be taken into consideration when planning for Geography assessment tasks, this is because if assessments are too challenging to students they tend to perform poorly and this was thought to hinder progress.

The following student has pointed to issues of the language barrier as one of the key assessment challenges.

Participant 1 (semi-structured interview) explained how the language barrier negatively affects the ability to do the assessment: *“Tests and assignments are fine, it’s just, it’s kind of hard to write the assignment and put it in simpler words when you can’t understand the topic. Just tell the students what you want, it doesn’t have to be them who have to figure it out. When you give a topic it should be easy for a student to understand what the lecturer wants, if a student can’t figure it out it’s hard to start writing.”*

The response from participant one on the previous page, suggests that the assignment topic was not explained to students for whom English is a second or third language because they could not understand what was expected of them. As a result, they faced difficulties in writing the assignment. This participant reveals that assessments would be less challenging if she was made aware of what is required in order to complete the assessments. It thus appears that guidance by the lecturer is required when students are given an assignment topic, due to the language barrier, and the guidance should include what is required from the students in order for them to write their assessments.

I now shift focus to discussing students' specific experiences of each of their assessments.

4.9 STUDENTS' SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES OF EACH OF THE ASSESSMENTS

In the questionnaires, the students wrote that they had completed two assessments for Geography Module B (test and an assignment), this was also confirmed during the semi-structured interview sessions. The students' experiences of the test are explored in the next section. Thereafter, the students' experiences of the assignment follow.

4.10 SUBTHEMES THAT EMERGED FROM QUESTIONNAIRES AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The following subthemes that emerged from data collected, contributed to answering the research questions:

4.10.1 The fairness of the test

4.10.2 The appropriateness of the test

4.10.3 The interest of the test

4.10.4 The level of challenge of the test

4.10.1 THE FAIRNESS OF THE TEST

The following experiences were revealed when students responded about the fairness of the test.

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) indicated that: “... *the problem is that it wasn't based on the content that was on the course pack.*”

Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) stated: “*the test was easy, wasn't properly set. There was a section that we haven't learnt before (section on water range). This didn't form part of the course pack. We lost a lot of marks because of it.*”

Student 1 (questionnaire) indicated: “*The test was interesting because it covered what we were taught in class, though there were sections that came out there that we did not learn.*”

Student 2 (questionnaire) stated: “*The questions for the test were not based on the content that we had been taught and were not based on the content of the course pack.*”

From the above students' responses it appears that the test was unfair because some students stated that the test was not based on the content of the course pack as well as what was covered during contact time. The reason they stated this is because there was a section that came out in the test that was not in the course pack and it was not taught during contact time. It thus appears that Geography students were not adequately prepared for the test since there were questions that they could not answer in the test because the content was unfamiliar, it was the first time during the assessment that they were encountering the new content.

The above responses from the Geography students suggest that students rely on the course pack as well as contact sessions for content knowledge and reference both whenever they study for their assessments. If they are tested on something that is not in the course pack and has not been covered during contact time, they feel that particular assessment task is unfair. One of the aims of assessment is to gather data about the learning situation but in this Geography module this assessment aim was not achieved because some of the content was new to students. They

discovered during the test that they were some questions they could not attempt to answer due to the knowledge gap.

However, it is important to note that some students had positive experiences of the test. For example, Student 8 (questionnaire) revealed that *“the test was about everything we learnt in class nothing new”*. This view differed from the majority of the students who revealed that some of the test content was something that they have not learnt during lectures and that it was not in their course pack.

4.10.2 THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE TEST

The language barrier seems to be a challenge for some Geography students that are not native English speakers. In this institution, English is used as medium of instruction. However, the majority of participants from this study revealed that English is not their mother tongue. Difficulties in language acquisition have proven to have a negative effect on Geography assessments, and this can be viewed in the following comment.

Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) stated that *“the test..., wasn’t properly set. The English is too difficult to understand”*. This student comments that the test was inappropriate and he didn’t perform well due to language difficulties. It appears from the student’s comment that he had difficulties with responding to the test questions due to him not understanding what was required from him. Thus, it turns out that language difficulties have the ability to hinder students’ progress.

It thus appears that some students use the level of language I in this case, English)in assessments to draw conclusions as to whether assessments were appropriate or not by comparing it to their language acquisition. So if the language used in assessments can be easily understood they deem assessments as appropriate, however if the language in the assessment is difficult to understand they deem assessment as inappropriate.

4.10.3 THE INTEREST OF THE TEST

One of the students felt that test was interesting because it covered the majority of the content that was covered in class. Student 1 (questionnaire) stated: *“the test was interesting ...it covered what we were taught in the class, though there were sections that came out there that we did not learn.* This comment suggests that assessments become interesting when they address content that has been learnt beforehand, meaning that there is an alignment between what is taught and what is assessed. However, assessments become less interesting when they address content that has not been taught during contact time, meaning that there is no alignment between what is taught and what is learnt. The student, however, doesn’t give details on what exactly is interesting about the test.

4.10.4 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THE TEST

The following are students’ experiences on the level of challenge of the test: Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) said that *“The test wasn’t too much difficult but the problem is that it wasn’t based on the content of the course pack”* and student 2 (questionnaire) revealed that *“the questions for the test were not based on the content that we have been taught and not based on the content of the course pack”*. It thus appears from the students comments that the test itself was not challenging but the problem was that it was not based on the content that they were taught and/or the content available in their course packs.

One other student shared the following experience of the test: Participant 1 (semi-structured interview) said that *“it wasn’t hard, the hard part is that you have to learn everything, there was no scope given.”* Once again, this comment relays that some Geography students would like to be provided with a breakdown of the content (specific assessment guidelines) that they have to focus on for the test, as this would assist them in preparing for the test. This student has expressed that when he has to study a lot of information for a test it becomes difficult to recall the huge amount of information.

In summary, some of Geography students participating in the study have indicated that if there is a mismatch between the assessment questions and the content taught in class, assessments are said to be challenging. Secondly, a student also expressed that he has to study a lot of content for the test which makes assessments challenging, as he has to recall a huge amount of information. Consequently he would like to be given a scope so that he can narrow down the content that he has to study when preparing for the test, this would in return eliminate the assessment as being a challenge.

4.11 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE ASSIGNMENT

Most students appeared to have a negative experience towards the assignment for various reasons, which included the language used in the assignment topic. Some students felt that while doing the assignment, it was not difficult per se but when the assignment was returned to them, after marking they had failed. Others felt that the assignment was difficult because the information on the course pack was not sufficient, they even went on to say that everything should be included in the course pack because they pay for it. As a result there was only one theme that emerged under this topic:

4.11.1 THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

Students revealed that the first assessment that they had completed for Geography Module B was an essay assignment based on the tri-cellular arrangement (global air circulation) and its influence on the African continent in terms of diseases. They experienced several challenges with this assessment:

Participant 1 (semi-structured interview) stated that *“the assignment was difficult because of the wording used in the topic.”* She further stated that *“it’s kind of hard to write the assignment and put it in simpler words when you can’t understand the topic.”*

Participant 2 (semi-structured interview) said that *“I don’t know whether to say it was difficult or easy because I thought I understood the question... but when the script came back I found that I failed. While doing the assignment it wasn’t difficult. Due to the lack of feedback I didn’t know why I failed or where I went wrong.”*

Participant 3 (semi-structured interview) reported, *“The assignment wasn’t easy because ... the information pertaining the assignment wasn’t sufficient. Everything should be in the course pack because we pay for that thing.”*

Participant 1 felt that the assignment was difficult because of the words (geographic language and English) that were used in the assignment question, this implies that the language usage (medium and the geography concepts) was problematic to some students. As these students have indicated that they faced difficulties in establishing an understanding of the geographical content that was required in order to answer the assignment questions. Due to not understanding the assignment question, they failed the assignment. This participant further stated that he went to see the lecturer to seek clarity with regard to the assessment but the lecturer advised that he could not assist him because of a heavy workload so his time is very limited due to administration work that he has to complete due to the heavy workload.

A similar view is shared by Participant 2, as he stated that he was confused about what was required from him while doing the assignment. This student stated that while doing the assignment he thought that he would pass because it seemed doable but when the assignment scripts came back he had failed. This suggests that this participant did not really understand the lecturers’ requirements and ascertaining what was required of him as a response so he failed the assignment. The above participant further revealed that the assessment mark was not justified, meaning that he was not provided with feedback explaining while he had failed the assignment. Comments from participant 1 and participant 2 suggest that there are many issues pertaining to the assessment that causes the assignment to be challenging.

Firstly, the inability of the lecturer to have consultation times for students who have problems understanding the task due to the language barrier and secondly the lack of assessment feedback. Hence, this student felt that consultation times would allow for seeking clarity and this would

help to eliminate any confusion with regard to the assessment tasks. The provision of feedback would assist to understand any mistakes that the student had made and assist in the growth of understanding the content.

Participant 3 on the other hand, revealed that as students they expect all the information pertaining to assessments to be in the course pack so that they can achieve good results, participant 1 shared a similar view. These participant's experiences imply that some Geography students do not like going to the library and consulting the internet to search for information that will assist them in assessment tasks, but instead they want everything to be included in the course pack because they pay for it. This reveals that some students rely heavily on the course pack when studying for assessments, so they would like to see assessments that assesses content which is available in the course pack. When this happens assessment challenges would be eliminated, this is according to students. It thus appears that when assessments are challenging students exhibit positive experiences of assessments, however if student finds that he can't cope with assessments they exhibit negative assessment experiences.

4.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented an analysis of data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews where undergraduate Geography students shared their experiences of assessments and the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. The findings were analysed using the themes that emerged from data its self in addition to ideas from the literature. The four themes emerged were fairness in assessments, appropriateness of assessments, the level of interest of the assessments and the level of challenge of assessments. Students' experiences also revealed aspects of the assessment methods in relation to the themes that emerged. Some of the key findings from the study reveal that students have different preferences of assessment methods, that the students wanted an alignment between what is taught (orally), their course pack (written) and what is assessed. Students expressed positive experiences when they were given adequate time to complete the assessments and they favoured assessments that assess different abilities and where they could use their creativity and other skills.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on students' experiences of assessment and the reasons for having such assessment experiences. The preceding chapter has presented the findings from the study, according to the subthemes that developed. This section presents a discussion of some key findings that emerged in the study together with the literature review as well as the theoretical framework indicated in chapter one and chapter two respectively. The methodological tools used in this study were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is used to present the findings.

5.2 AN OVERVIEW OF WHAT CONTITUTES FAIRNESS IN ASSESSMENT

Assessment fairness is one of the themes that emerged from this study. It is therefore imperative to establish what is meant by fairness in assessment, in order to understand the students' experiences of fairness in assessment. Johnson and Jenkins (2009) state that "formative assessment is commonly referred to as assessment for learning." The concept of fairness emerged when students were asked to share their experiences of formative assessments. The BEAR system relates that good assessment is assessment which is fair. According to McMillan (2000, p. 1) "good assessment is fair and ethical". From this argument, it can be observed that there is a link between the following concepts: 'good assessment' and 'fairness', which is why the concept of fairness in assessment should be explored further. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2013) states that fairness in assessment can be achieved by assessing what you have taught.

Furthermore, the Eberly Center (2015, p. 1) states that "if assessments are misaligned with learning objectives, and instructional strategies, it can undermine both student motivation and learning." Some students from Geography Module B that participated in this study revealed that in some of the assessments there was no alignment between their instruction and the

requirements for the assessment task. As a result, students feel that their performance was poor and this constitutes unfair assessment. This can be observed in the following comment by participant 3 from Geography Module B who revealed that: *“there was a section that were haven’t learnt before (section on water range). This didn’t form part of the course pack. We lost a lot of marks because of it.”* Stiggins (2007, p. 3) argues that “teachers and students are partners in the assessment for learning process. From, this student’s comment it can be observed that there was no partnership between the lecturer and students in terms of assessment for the learning process in Geography module B. This because according to this student there was a section that came out that they have never learnt before. If the lecturer and students were partners it would have been clear to students prior to writing their assessments what they were going to be assessed on.

Also, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2014) argues that assessment should be fair and justifiable, in ways that students must have a full understanding of what is required of them and be able to do it. Students 3, 4, 5 & 8 were of the opinion that the assessment tasks presented to them were fair in Module A. This reveals that students were satisfied with the quality of assessments and the idea that they demonstrated fairness. But, students 1, 2 & 7 from Geography Module B revealed that they felt that the assessments were unfair.

Fairness being one of the major qualities of assessment, according to Atherton (2013), should therefore be taken into consideration by any lecturer before the formulation an assessment task. When an assessment task is fair, student performance is improved and positive assessment experiences are exhibited by students. This agrees with the first principle of the BEAR assessment system which sees assessment as a developmental process, assessment should develop students through the provision of feedback and advising students about what is required from them in terms of assessments. Some students in Module B revealed that they did not receive feedback on their poor performance and as such they could not understand why they performed poorly. In such cases where assessment serves as a developmental process, fairness must be demonstrated. Students feel that fairness can also be obtained in assessments in terms of the provision of a scope, and having the knowledge required for the task at hand in the coursepack.

Findings from this study reveal that they were two views with regard to the fairness of assessments. Some participants felt that assessments were fair and some felt that assessments were unfair and they have given reasons to support their arguments. This brings us to what constitutes the elements of fairness.

5.2.1 THE ELEMENTS OF FAIRNESS

After the participants shared their experiences of the Geography assessments, they also had to state the reasons for them having such experiences. The researcher has termed these reasons as the elements of assessments which demonstrate fairness. It is imperative to understand these elements or reasons as they have contributed to students drawing conclusions as to whether they saw the assessments as fair or unfair.

a) Time allocation

Students' expressed that assessments were fair due to time limits that were favourable to them. A study carried out by Manik (2012) on Geography students' views of their assessments reveals that when short time restrictions are set on assessments, they can be viewed as an obstacle to students. Therefore, giving students adequate time for completing their assessments is an essential practice of ensuring fairness in assessment. According to Watagodakumbura (2013) giving students' sufficient time to complete assessments also allows for diverse student needs as individuals are different and will work at a different pace to each other. Students capabilities also differ and Jones (2014, p. 1) notes that "experienced educators know that all children can learn, but at very different rates." The views presented by both these authors suggest that, a lecturer should be well informed in terms of students' strengths and weaknesses and what the average student can achieve in a particular time frame.

In this study, student 9 from Geography Module A was of opinion that assessments were fair because students were given enough time to complete the assessment activities. Hence, this suggests that students' experiences are generally positive when they are given enough time to complete assessment tasks. However, if the time allocated for the completion of assessment tasks are inadequate, then students' exhibit negative experiences of the assessment. Manik (2012) warns that if students are

unable to recall or complete their assessments within the time limits that are set by the lecturer for the completion of the assessments, then students are likely to fail.

b) Course packs

The findings from this study also reveal that the Geography students were given course packs at the beginning of the semester, since no textbooks were assigned to Geography Module B. This suggests that these course packs may have been used to replace a textbook. According to the Stanford University library (2015) a course pack is a collection of photocopied notes used in lectures, it is either distributed as a book or handouts to students. These books or handouts are used by students and lecturers as a reference throughout the semester. Other authors assert this same view, for example, Stewart (2014, p. 1) states that “a course pack is a compilation of course materials put into one easy-to-access place for students. Course Packs can act as a supplement to a textbook or as a replacement.”

Course packs are generally used by institutions of higher learning globally. In this study students referred to these course packs throughout the semester and they used them to prepare for assessments as well. Students see course packs as a very important guide that would assist them in attaining good results. Thus, when students were asked to comment about their experiences of assessment, some mentioned their experiences related to the lack of adequate content in the course pack. As a result, course packs form an essential part of the element of assessment fairness.

Consequently, some participants from the interviews stated that assessments were unfair because they did not assess what was in the course pack. This finding reveals that students rely heavily on the course pack and lectures for content knowledge and not on other sources of knowledge. They perceive course packs as essential tools that should provide all the knowledge that would be required in that particular module in order for them to progress. One of the students further stated that the course pack should be filled with enough content for the assessments of that particular module and well as exam preparation ideas. This was a firm view based on the idea that students pay for the course pack.

Students thus consider assessments to be fair when they assess the content that is in the course pack, however when assessments do not assess the content that is in the course pack it leads to students having negative experiences and deeming assessment as being unfair.

c) Scope

The findings from this study revealed that some of the participants experienced the assessments as unfair because they were not given specific assessment guidelines. They referred to these specific guidelines as a “scope”. There is no study found which examined the assessment guideline termed a “scope”, which matches the participants understanding of an assessment scope. However, a study that explored undergraduate students’ experiences of their assessments by Manik (2012, p. 102) revealed that a scope is “a detailed out-line” of an assessment. Some participants from this study appeared to associate assessment fairness with a scope, meaning that assessments are fair when a detailed outline of the assessment is provided and assessments to be unfair when a scope is not provided.

Interestingly, this finding relating to a scope is similar to the one that was reported in Manik (2012) where there were some students who expressed a belief that a lecturer should tell them what would appear in an assessment. It was also expressed in another study that a scope is needed by some students for test and exam purposes, for example student 16 in Manik’s study (2012) stated that the lecturer “*did not concentrate on the article that was going to come out.*” And also student 17 remarked that he/she under-performed because he/she was “*not given a scope and ... expected to know it all*”. Comments from these students suggest that these students do not want to study all the content for their Geography assessments but instead they want to be given clues by their lecturers and a scope because these would help them to focus their learning to only specific content that will appear in their assessments.

Hence, Manik (2012, p. 99) stated that “the most common approach revealed by students (in tests) appeared to be ‘spotting’, with students focusing more on one area/aspect in terms of the content to the exclusion of other areas, clearly not even a surface approach to learning.” It thus appeared in her study, that some students wanted short cuts when preparing for assessments, they

did not want to gain a deeper understanding of the content knowledge that was covered in the duration of the module but instead they wanted a break down or summaries of content that would make learning for Geography assessments much more easier for them. So they resorted to spotting when learning for assessments. In the present study, the students did not allude to spotting but it could be that they were spotting because there was a complaint about the extensive content to learn, which is why they wanted reduced content to study for example in a test, as can be seen in their request for a scope.

Some students in this present study stated that the assessments were unfair because of an absence of a scope. It is important to note that, there is no other study found examining the assessment guideline called a “scope” except for Manik (2012, p. 102) who stated that “students’ conceptions of learning for an assessment, such as a test, is determined by a need for a scope.” Further, findings from this present study, suggest that the Geography lecturer who was teaching module B gave students broader assessment guidelines which somehow confused students about what specifically was going to be assessed which is also why some students felt that assessments were unfair.

5.3 LECTURER WORKLOAD AND STUDENT PREPARATION FOR ASSESSMENT

Student feedback is also a valuable area of students’ experiences of their assessments. Providing students with feedback after an assessment contributes to the effective development of the student. The first principle of the theoretical framework used for this study states that assessment should be based on a developmental perspective to a student (Wilson & Sloan, 2000), therefore providing students with feedback on how they fared in the assessment and why they achieved such marks would lead to students’ improving their understanding and contributing to feed forward. Some participants in Module B expressed the view that they didn’t understand why they had failed due to a lack of feedback after the assessment.

According to Wilson & Sloan (2000) the first principle of the BEAR assessment system which is the theoretical framework outlined in this study states that assessment should be based on a

development perspective of the student. This view of assessment implies that assessment should develop students, typically this could happen in assessment feedback. This is why it is imperative to note that there are some other factors that contributed to the unfairness of assessment which were highlighted by the research participants' of this study. It is for this reason, one has to consider the workload of lecturers as it appears to impact on the amount of time that a lecturer is able to dedicate to his/her students' development in undertaking to provide feedback to the students. One of the ways of developing students is by preparing them for future assessments and this is why feedback is so essential towards achieving feed forward, since the assessments determine whether they progress or not.

Interestingly, the workload of lecturers is on the increase internationally and not only at this case study institution. According to Asthana (2008) a survey carried out by a poll of lecturers that are affiliated under the university and college union found that 71 percent of its universities and colleges have seen an increase in class sizes. An increase in class sizes implies an increase in the lecturer's workload. This is in line with findings from this study as participants from Module B stated that assessments were unfair also because she failed them due to the lack of knowledge of what was expected from her in terms of the assessment content. The researcher then probed to discover why the participant did not consult the lecturer, and the participant then reported that the lecturer informed the student that he is busy because his workload is too heavy.

The above concurs with the findings reported in Asthana (2008, p. 1). The findings of that study revealed that "students demand more contact time with lectures in return for their immense tuition fees, final year history undergraduates at Bristol University complained that they would only have two hours of lectures a week". In that report, lecturers have responded by stating they are 'snowed under with paperwork'. South African universities are no exception, they have also witnessed a growth in the numbers of students, according to Combrinck & Hatch (2012, p. 81) who reveal that "higher education institutions world-wide have experienced growth in students enrolments." The centre for the study of higher education (CSHE, 2002) acknowledges that Australia as well has also witnessed a growth in numbers especially in undergraduate courses, very much like in South Africa.

Thus, the growth in student enrolments also impacts on assessments and students' development since some students have revealed that the lecturer was not available for consultation because he has a heavy workload. The CSHE (2002) also states that large classes create assessment challenges and that workload issues is central in decisions that involve the assessment of large classes. This was also evident in this study, as some students could not get the clarity on the requirements for the assessment due to the lack of consultation time and these students indicated that the result was they failed the assessment.

The availability of the lecturer for student consultation contributes to student development as students are able to enquire about their problem areas and get assistance and improve their understanding and so perform better in their assessments. According to some participants from this present study, when students (in Module A) were able to get adequate support from lecturer, to get clarity on assessments they deemed the assessments as fair. However, if students were unable to consult with their respective lecturers about the assessment, they remain in the dark and perform poorly in assessments. As a result, they deem the assessments as unfair.

Thus, the unavailability of the lecture to consult with students compromises one of the aims of assessment in higher education, which is assessing higher order skills (Bostock, 2006). Hence, if student cannot consult their lecturers to seek clarity in terms of assessment they would not be able to effectively respond to questions that require higher order thinking skills.

5.4 ADDITIONAL ASPECTS IN THE FAIRNESS OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

The findings from this study revealed that a test was a popular choice as a method of assessing students in both the Geography modules (Module A and Module B). In Module A, a test was written twice (a test comprising of short answers and a test that was an essay type) and in Module B a test comprising of short questions was written.

When the Geography students shared their experiences of the test, positive experiences were exhibited from students undertaking Module A. In contrast, negative experiences of the test were exhibited by students undertaking Module B. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 1) there

are three contributing factors that cause a test to appear fair to students. Firstly, “all the material in the test is relevant to the course's objectives and was covered in lectures, readings or both. Secondly, the test is appropriate in difficulty for the course. Lastly, the test is well-designed, with clearly phrased questions.”

Participants from this study commented on the same areas stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) above in respect of fairness. Some students from Module A mentioned that the test was fair because they were adequately prepared for the test by their lecturer during contact time and they were also given readings and summaries to assist them in preparation. Students from this module further added that the test was fair because a make-up test was given. The students appreciated the lecturers' efforts of helping them to improve their performance, since it was observed that they did not perform well in the first test.

The lecturer (Module A) made use of assessment data. She had observed from the mark list that students did not perform well in the test comprising of short questions and then decided to give them a make-up test which comprised essay type questions after further engagement with the students. The third principle of the BEAR assessment – the theoretical framework in this study states that teachers are the managers of assessment data. Assessment data is able to reveal how much students have achieved in relation to what they were expected to achieve, it closes the gap between the desired mark and what students have achieved (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). This idea is based on teachers managing assessment data, meaning that they make comments to students in their work to show them where they have gone wrong and what steps to follow if they want to achieve an improved performance in future assessments. In this case study, students were given a chance to improve their marks after class feedback, in addition to individual feedback and the lecturer allowed them to write a second test.

An alternative experience was shared by participants from Module B in that the test was viewed as unfair because there was no alignment between what was taught and what was assessed. This practice is in conflict with the second principle of the BEAR assessment which states that there should be a match between instruction and assessment. It thus appear that when there is an alignment between what is taught and what is assessed students deem assessments as fair and

they exhibit positive assessment experiences. However, if there is no alignment between what is taught and what is assessed, students deem assessment as unfair and negative assessment experiences are exhibited by students.

5.5 THE NUANCES OF APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

Most participants from Geography Module B expressed their assessments experiences as being favourable in terms of appropriateness because the content was relevant to the course's objectives, as this was a climatology module and the assessments addressed climatology.

Appropriate assessment is about making informed decisions when selecting assessment tasks that would be suitable for your students says Johnson (2005) who notes that students have different learning styles and their strengths and weaknesses are also different when it comes to assessments. The author further advises that lecturers need to consider these differences when choosing assessments for their courses. Some participants from Geography Module A expressed that the assessments for this module were appropriate as different assessment methods were used to assess the students. For example participant 13 wrote *“the assessments given in ... module were appropriate and the fact that we did not get an assignment took the burden off our shoulders.”* For this particular student, assessments were appropriate because she was given a chance to display her creativity skills, this was her assessment strength. Assignments on the other hand as a method of assessment, are her weakness which is why she has expressed that when they did not get an assignment, she was happy.

Participants from this study have advocated that appropriate assessment methods are the ones that cater for different students' abilities and also prepares them for their future roles as teachers. In Module A, a poster that was used to assess these particular students, boosted their professional learning and gave them the confidence to teach floods and natural hazards to learners in schools without worry. It thus appears that, when appropriate assessment methods are used to assess students, students see their value and exhibit positive experiences of assessments and they consider these assessments as appropriate.

According to Mifflin (1997) it is fundamental to use a variety of assessment methods to assess students because students' abilities are not the same. One would conclude that when a lecturer uses a variety of methods to assess students' capabilities, students exhibit positive experiences of their assessments as both their strengths as weaknesses are tested. Thus, allowing students to display their capabilities by using a variety of methods to assess them is in line with the theoretical frame-work expressed early in this study. The fourth principle of the BEAR assessment according to Wilson & Sloan (2000) is that classroom assessment must be reliable and valid. Therefore, when lecturers use different assessment method to ensure that the assessments cater for different students' capabilities, then assessment is said to also be reliable and valid because it matches the content taught.

5.6 THE VALUE OF FEEDBACK AND FEED FORWARD

It becomes a lecturers' responsibility to provide assessment feedback to his or her students. Hounsell (2003) argues that an important part of learning in higher education is assessment and feedback. Alausa (2003) and Biggs (2006) infer that assessment feedback allows lecturers to gauge whether students have reached their educational or learning goals. In a study, Duffield and Spencer (2002) surveyed medical students' views about the purposes and fairness of assessment, and their study revealed that a large number of students, more than 95% agreed that providing feedback was one of the important purposes of assessment. The findings from this study also indicate that students are aware that one of the important purposes of assessment is the provision of significant feedback. Similarly, for the present study, participant 2 from Module B stated “... *due to the lack of feedback I didn't know why I failed or where I went wrong.*” Participant 3 from Module B also indicated “*there was no assessment feedback so I could not see my mistakes.*”

The comment above reveals that students require feedback from their assessments, as it assists them to understand why they attained a certain mark and to improve their understanding which contributes to feed forward. According to Ferrell (2012, p. 13) “feed forward is equally important to learners' progress. While feedback focuses on current performance (and may simply justify the grade awarded), feed forward looks ahead to the next assignment. Feed forward offers constructive guidance on how to improve. A combination of feedback and feed forward ensures

that assessment has an effective developmental impact on learning (provided the student has the opportunity and support to develop their own evaluative skills in order to use the feedback effectively)". This author has highlighted that the provision of feedback and feed forward is necessary for a student to progress.

Assessments are then said to be appropriate by students when it allows them to develop. These would be an assessment that considers the students' strengths and weaknesses. But, inappropriate assessment on the other hand, would be assessment that does not consider students' strengths and weaknesses, and thus assessment which does not develop students.

5.7 STUDENTS INTEREST IN CREATIVE FORMS OF ASSESSMENTS

Most students from Geography Module A were of opinion that some of the assessment methods used in this module were interesting because they allowed for creativity. Brookhart (2013, p. 30) argues that "assignments that require students to produce new ideas or reorganize existing ideas in a new way are likely to foster student creativity." Some participants expressed that they enjoyed these assessments because they were not complex, since they required them to display their creativity, maximise visual appeal and order relevant content and this is discussed below.

The poster was a method of assessments that was used to assess in Geography Module A. The participants from Geography Module A stated that they were required to design a poster on natural hazards: floods, droughts etc. This assessment was given in this module for students to complete over an assigned period of time. The findings from this study revealed that students were generally happy with this form of assessment as it was different from the usual other assessment methods that the students are given in higher education.

Student 15 from Geography Module A, revealed that that the poster as an assessment method was the most interesting method of assessment as it allowed for creativity. This particular student was happy because they had to search for pictures and think about which colours would look attractive on the poster. Most students expressed that the poster assignment was out of the ordinary method of assessment because they are so used to writing essay assignments.

Assessments were regarded as interesting by students from this study if they assess students' creativity skills. Some students suggested that assessments were interesting because it was unusual- the poster as a form of assessment. These students have indicated that they are used to writing essay assessments, this is why they valued the poster assessments more than all the assessment methods that were used in assessing them.

Participants from Geography Module A commented that although assessments for this module were challenging, they were able to attempt them with ease because they were adequately prepared by their lecturer during contact time. This finding agrees with principle one of the BEAR assessment system. The principle states that there should be a match between instruction and assessment. Findings from this study revealed that, there was indeed a match between instruction and assessment in the Geography Module A as students have confidently expressed although assessments were challenging, they were able to attempt them with ease because they were adequately prepared for assessments by their lecturer during contact time with a variety of resources.

5.8 THE LANGUAGE BARRIER IN ASSESSMENTS

Another key finding from this study with regard to assessment challenges is that the Module B assessments were challenging because of language difficulties, commonly known as the language barrier. A study conducted by Elsworth (2015, p. 3) reveals that “millions of children in nations around the world enter classrooms each year unable to speak the same language as the teacher. In the United States alone, English language learners are one of the fastest-growing populations within the educational system”. A similar trend has been observed in a number of the South African universities including the case study institution where this research study was conducted. An example of this comes from participant 3 in Geography Module B who commented that “*English was too difficult to understand.*” The reason why this participant had language difficulties is because she is not an English first language speaker and the university uses English as a medium of instruction during lectures as is the expectation.

Hence, it is not known whether the lecturer has knowledge of the local tongue, namely isiZulu and can then code switch to ensure understanding. This student thus struggled with assessments because of the language barrier but conceptual knowledge for Geography was also a problem. A student stated that she failed all her assessments because she struggled to understand the lecturer while he was teaching. Students are not tested on their level of English prior to being given entry to this institution. It was also felt that the level of the English was not simple. In addition, when she was given assessments she battled to understand what was required from her in order to meet the lecturers' requirements. It is unknown whether the student brought this to the lecturer's attention.

According to Mooznah and Owodally (2014, p. 198) "English is the main language of literacy and the main written medium of instruction throughout the education system." Geography education in the university where the study was conducted uses English as a medium of instruction. As a result, when some students experienced difficulties in understanding English, it negatively impacted on their assessments because they were expected to provide answers to assessment questions in a language wherein they were experiencing difficulties in understanding and that is coupled with the acquisition of geographical concepts. Gruenbaum (2012) states that students struggle with verbal and written English skills. Some participants from this study stated that they also struggle with verbal and written English skills.

According to Coughlan (2008, p. 1) "there have been cases where students have had difficulty even understanding the questions that have been set, he says, let alone being able to produce a degree-level written answer". This matches a finding from this study where Participant 1 from Module B said "*it's kind of hard to write the assignment and put it in simpler words when you can't understand the topic*" as it is written. The failure to understand what is required from an assignment topic becomes a nightmare for students, as some have stated that assessments challenges are caused by language difficulties.

This study reveals that at times assessment challenges are caused by language difficulties: academic language of the discipline and the medium of instruction; the ability of a student to understand and respond to the lecturer assessment questions in imperative in ensuring that the

student has acquired the required knowledge in order to progress. Hence, strategies have been proposed by some South African universities to overcome the language barriers. Meersman (2013, p. 1) states that “the University of KwaZulu-Natal announced that it would make learning isiZulu compulsory from next year.” This is a typical example of one of the ways that one South African university is utilising to break the language barriers for students.

Thus, if students do not experience language difficulties and are able to communicate with their lecturers then in terms of the assessments, they can become less challenging. However, if students cannot understand the language (disciplinary and medium of instruction) used in lectures and in assessments, assessments become more challenging.

5.9 THE MARKING OF ASSESSMENTS

One of the methods of assessing students that was used in Geography Module B is an assignment. The findings from this study revealed that students were required to write an essay assignment on the Tri-cellular arrangement (global air circulation) and its impact on diseases that are common in Africa. Most of the students from Geography Module B expressed that the assignment was challenging because of insufficient information, the language used as well as the marking of the assessment its self.

A study that explored undergraduate Geography students’ views of their assessments that was conducted by Manik (2012) revealed that some students complain about unfair marking practices. The issue of the lecturer’s marking has also received attention from forums such as the one called student room. In this forum, Student Room (2015, p. 1) a student commented “*one lecturer just doesn't like me and I'm having a lot of trouble with her unfair marking... my highest grade with her is 57*”. The student further referred to the lecturer as a strict marker. The comments from this student suggest that at times, although some students may feel that they have done justice in completing their assessments, their marks do not resonate with their feelings. This student’s comments of unfair marking coincided with the findings from this present study referring to lecturer’s marking.

Hence, participant 1 from Geography module B, commented “*even when marking they should be aware that they are marking for undergraduate 3rd year students.*” This participant stated that the assessments were not that challenging, the problem was with the marking. The participant stated that the lecturer was so strict in marking it was as if he was marking for post-graduate students. The student is of opinion that the lecturer’s marking has an impact on students’ performance in assessments. This is because some students stated that they were quite confident that they were going to perform well in their assessments but due to the lecturer being too strict when marking they ended up failing their assessments. In this regard the lecturer is alleged to be the cause of poor assessment results due to what students’ view as unfair marking practices (Manik, 2012). From the above it is apparent that some students feel that lecturers contribute to their assessment challenges by being too strict when they are marking.

5.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed Geography students’ experiences of their assessments for either one of the two modules that the students have completed (Geography Module A and Module B) and the reasons for them having such assessment experiences. The discussion was linked with literature and the principles of the BEAR assessment, which is the theoretical framework used for this study. The subthemes that were used to analysis the findings were: fairness in assessment, appropriateness of assessments, the interest of assessments and the level of challenge of assessment. One of the key findings was that students revealed that they consider assessments to be fair when they are given enough time to complete them. They considered assessments to be appropriate when their abilities are considered when assessment methods are chosen by the lecturer and students appeared to favour some assessment methods over others. Students also revealed that assessments are interesting when they assess creativity skills or when a different/unusual assessment method is used. Lastly, some students stated that at times assessments are not that challenging for them but it is the lecturer’s marking which causes them to fail the assessments.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explored Geography undergraduate students' experiences of their assessment. The study also sought to understand the reasons why students had experiences of assessment. The study was conducted in one of the institutions of higher learning in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. The research sample for the study consisted of predominantly 2nd year and 3rd year students that had completed either Geography Module A or Geography Module B, as these students were in a better position to share their experiences of assessments because they have completed assessments for one of the above mentioned modules.

This chapter comprises of the following aspects: aim and research questions, some of the main findings that were analysed in the preceding chapter. The chapter then proceeds with providing suggestions for further research and ends with a conclusion.

6.2 THE AIM AND THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aimed at exploring undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessment and the reasons as to why undergraduate Geography students had such experiences of assessment. The main purpose of this study was to give value to Geography students' voices and understand them with regard to the phenomenon of assessment in two Geography undergraduate modules. Students were given an opportunity to voice their experiences of their formative assessments that they had completed for either the Geography Module A or the Geography Module B. Hence, the study sought to answer the following critical research questions:

1. What are the undergraduate students' experiences of assessments?
2. Why do the undergraduate Geography students have such experiences of assessment?

6.3 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

Even though the participants completed one of the Geography modules (Geography Module A or Geography Module B), the data derived from both the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews revealed that students had a common understanding of the concept of assessment fairness. Participants from this study revealed that they consider assessments to be fair when they assess what has been taught during the lectures. Students exhibited positive assessment experiences in instances where there was an alignment between what was taught and what was assessed. Conversely, students exhibited negative experiences of assessments where there was no or little alignment between what was taught and what was assessed.

Moreover, some participants revealed that the assessments were fair because they were given adequate time to prepare and complete their assessments. However, it is also important to note that the students who felt that assessments were unfair revealed that they were not given an assessment scope. The majority of the students indicated that having a scope for tests and exams reduces the amount of content that they have to study for that particular assessment. The plea for a scope was a common request from the majority of the participants from this study which I later discuss.

There was evidence of the use of different assessment methods in Module A which catered for the students' different abilities, and as a result positive experiences of students' were exhibited as some students stated that the assessment methods used were appropriate because of their variety. Most students' favoured the poster as a method of assessment, and the reason for this was because it allowed them to be creative. Furthermore, the participants stated that the poster allowed them to showcase their strengths and weaknesses and assist them professionally as planning and doing a poster was a key aspect of Geography teaching and they were preparing to be Geography teachers. Although some students have highlighted that they were happy with most assessment methods, there were some assessment challenges that they experienced.

Firstly, there was a problem with regard to language acquisition (disciplinary and medium of Instruction) for some participants from this study. This is because some participants revealed that

their assessments were challenging because of the use of English as a medium of instruction and assessment. In particular, the level of English that is used is perceived to be high and English is not being their mother tongue. From the students comments it became clear that some students experienced language as a barrier in their assessments, as a result they faced assessment challenges. These participants expressed negative experiences of assessment because they could not understand what was expected of them in order to attain good marks in their assessments. Research suggests that language barriers are becoming popular obstacles that hinder students' progress globally and locally as some students are not English first language speakers and they attend institutions where English is used as a medium of instruction.

Moreover, students expressed that they found the assessments were challenging because they could not get assistance from their respective lecturer, thus inadequate academic support was also an assessment challenge. One of the students required consultation with the lecturer and could not get clarity about the assessment because the lecturer stated that he is too busy as he has a heavy workload. It thus appears that the lecturers' workload impacts on students' experiences of assessments because they are unable to receive sufficient guidance in the preparation phase of their assessment task. Hence, students expect one on one consultation with the lecturer but the lecturers' heavy workload denies them an opportunity to interact outside of lecture times. Consequently, students continue to experience assessment challenges as they cannot get clarity on problem areas that they experience, and negatively affecting their assessment performance. Thus a student who is unable to access the lecturer timeously when preparing for an assessment will exhibit negative assessment experiences. Hence, the lack of consultation times with the lecturer promotes a negative assessment experience.

This leads us to the recommendations section

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are issues that emerged from this study on assessment, and the researcher recommends them as areas for future research:

- The students' plea for an assessment scope prior to writing a test or an exam, presents a new trend in assessment preparation as student learning for assessments is now being channeled by a mechanism called a scope. The issue of an assessment scope needs to be explored further in another study as there are no studies examining this concept of an 'assessment scope' in the way that students from the study have described it- to limit the content they have learnt in preparation for an assessment.
- It appears that the increasing numbers of students enrolling in institutions of higher learning has resulted in lecturer's workloads increasing, and the impact of heavy workloads on assessment preparation of students requires closer examination. The need for lecturers to be available to consult with their students and how this can be adequately addressed given the large class sizes and limited staff in higher education in SA requires future study. The study would be useful in establishing how assessment performances are impacted upon by the lecturers' increasing workloads in South African institutions of higher learning.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The chapter has presented some of the key insights from the study on undergraduate Geography students' experiences of their assessments and the reasons for such assessment experiences. The chapter also discussed a few areas for further research.

In this study undergraduate Geography students were given a platform to express their experiences of their assessments. The researcher believes that it is imperative for institutions of higher learning to be made aware of students' assessment experiences as they are the university's customers. As customers, they deserve a platform to express how they feel about the services rendered by the university especially in the field of assessment because failing assessments has repercussions for students but also for the throughput and dropout rates of institutions that depend on government funding. Assessment feedback is required from students as this would help the university to identify areas of improvements.

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University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Appendix A

Edgewood Campus

Pinetown

3600

30 May 2013

Dear participant (student)

I am a Masters student at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and I wish to undertake research at your current university of study. I would like to explore your experiences about the assessments that you completed for Geography Module B and the reasons for having these experiences.

Your participation in the study will take an hour or less for each session. There will be three sessions in total, the first one will require you to fill out a questionnaire, the second one would be to participate in a semi-structured interview and the last one would require you to check the summary of findings so as to confirm whether your views have been documented correctly. The confirmation of findings is subject to your participation in a semi-structured interview. The times and dates of meeting are negotiable so as to ensure that you are not distracted from your lectures.

Please note that participation in the study is strictly voluntary and you are free to pull out whenever a need arises without stating the reasons for doing so. With this letter I hereby ask you to give consent to participate in this study.

You can contact my supervisor, Dr. S. Manik for further details on 031 260 3706.

Yours faithfully,

Thabile Zondi

073 541 36 45

DECLARATION

I, (full name of student) hereby confirm that I understand the content of this document and the nature of the research project. I give my consent to participate in this project. I am aware that I may withdraw whenever a need arises.

Signature

Date

University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Appendix B

Edgewood Campus

Pinetown

3600

30 May 2013

Dear participant (student)

I am a Masters student at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and I wish to undertake research at your current university of study. I would like to explore your experiences about the assessments that you completed for Geography Module A and the reasons for having these experiences.

Your participation in the study will take an hour or less for each session. There will be three sessions in total, the first one will require you to fill out a questionnaire, the second one would be to participate in a semi-structured interview and the last one would require you to check the summary of findings so as to confirm whether your views have been documented correctly. The confirmation of findings is subject to your participation in a semi-structured interview. The times and dates of meeting are negotiable so as to ensure that you are not distracted from your lectures.

Please note that participation in the study is strictly voluntary and you are free to pull out whenever a need arises without stating the reasons for doing so. With this letter I hereby ask you to give consent to participate in this study.

You can contact my supervisor, Dr. S. Manik for further details on 031 260 3706.

Yours faithfully,

Thabile Zondi

073 541 36 45

DECLARATION

I, (full name of student) hereby confirm that I understand the content of this document and the nature of the research project. I give my consent to participate in this project. I am aware that I may withdraw whenever a need arises.

Signature

Date

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR 2013 MODULE A STUDENTS

1. Gender (Tick **only one**): ☐ Female ☐ Male

2. What is your age? (Tick **only one**):

<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20	<input type="checkbox"/> 21-25
<input type="checkbox"/> 26-30	<input type="checkbox"/> 30-35
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	

3. Race (Tick **only one**):

<input type="checkbox"/> White	<input type="checkbox"/> Black
<input type="checkbox"/> Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Coloured
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	

4. Year of study:

<input type="checkbox"/> 2 nd Year	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 rd Year
<input type="checkbox"/> 4 th Year	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

5. Please indicate below how many Geography modules you have completed:

<input type="checkbox"/> One	<input type="checkbox"/> Two
<input type="checkbox"/> Three	<input type="checkbox"/> Four

6. How many assessment activities were you given for Geography 410 this year?
_____.

7. What were the assessment activities?

<input type="checkbox"/> Test	<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment
<input type="checkbox"/> Poster	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

8. Did you submit a draft copy for any of the assessment activities mentioned above? If so in which one/s?

9. Provide your view/s and your thinking about each of the assessments that you were given in Geography 410 this year.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR 2013 MODULE B STUDENTS

1. Gender (Tick **only one**): ☐ Female ☐ Male
2. What is your age? (Tick **only one**):
☐ 15-20 ☐ 21-25
☐ 26-30 ☐ 30-35
☐ Other: _____
3. Race (Tick **only one**):
☐ White ☐ Black
☐ Indian ☐ Coloured
☐ Other: _____
4. Year of study:
☐ 2nd Year ☐ 3rd Year
☐ 4th Year ☐ Other: _____
5. Please indicate below how many Geography modules you have completed:
☐ One ☐ Two
☐ Three ☐ Four
6. How many assessment activities were you given for Geography 410 this year?
_____.
7. What were the assessment activities?
☐ Test ☐ Assignment
☐ Poster ☐ Other: _____
8. Did you submit a draft copy for any of the assessment activities mentioned above? If so in which one/s?

9. Provide your view/s and your thinking about each of the assessments that you were given in Geography 410 this year.

Semi-structured Interview (Module A)

Pseudonym: _____

Demographic Data: _____

Baseline data: Is this your first/ second attempt at Geog Module A? _____

1. Can you please recall each of the assessments you completed for *Geog Module A*?

2. What are your views about each of the assessments?

3. Can you share your experiences about each of these assessments? I am interested in knowing why you have those particular views?

Semi-structured Interview (Module B)

Pseudonym: _____

Demographic Data: _____

Baseline data: Is this your first/ second attempt at Geog Module B? _____

4. Can you please recall each of the assessments you completed for *Geog Module B*?

5. What are your views about each of the assessments?

6. Can you share your experiences about each of these assessments? I am interested in knowing why you have those particular views?



23 May 2013

Ms Thabiso Andiso Zondi 206513797
School of Education
EdgeWood Campus

Protocol reference number: HSS/0394/013M
Project title: Undergraduate Geography students' views of their assessments

Dear Ms Zondi

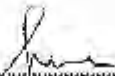
Expedited approval

I wish to inform you that your application has been granted Full Approval.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you every thing of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully


Professor U Bob (Chair) and Dr S Singh (Deputy Chair)

/s/

cc Supervisor: Dr Sadhana Manik
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr MN Davids
cc School Administrator: Ms Bongekile Branga

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
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Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 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Undergraduate geography students' experiences of their assessments”

by Zondi Thabile

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